

BEING IN THE PICTURE: THE MOVIE FAN AND QUEER LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Studying twentieth-century literature through the lens of film studies and queer theory, “Being in the Picture” stages an interdisciplinary conversation that posits queer film fandom as a move away from current theorizations of queer spectators. Movie fandom, usually dismissed as a way to name an unserious and vacuously emotional type of engagement with cinema, is here presented as a way to theorize engagements with cinema that go beyond mere camp or appropriation. Building on the affective turn in queer theory and recuperating the various pleasures these authors found in cinema while growing up, “Being in the Picture” explores the ways this very engagement with cinema was formally registered in twentieth century queer literature. Thus, while fandom seems like a mere overlooked biographical detail in the lives of the authors that make up my canon, my project uses it to stage conversations both about literary form and queer spectatorship.

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Material from my third chapter will appear in a forthcoming volume of *GLQ*, while portions of my fourth chapter will appear in *Genre*.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mothers of America

let your kids go to the movies!  
get them out of the house so they won't know what you're up to  
it's true that fresh air is good for the body  
but what about the soul  
that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images  
- Frank O'Hara, "Ave Maria"

Two Spanish school boys go to the local movie theater to catch the new Sara Montiel flick, *Esa Mujer* (1969). We see them excitedly watching the Spanish and Hollywood actress on screen. "Que guapa es Sara!" ("Sara is so beautiful!") one exclaims upon seeing her, draped in a bright purple ensemble, arriving at a nunnery. The improbable, potentially laughable (and camp-ready) plot of the film comes to a climactic point when Soledad de Jesus (Montiel), a former missionary nun who left the order after being raped by natives and became a well-known singer, returns to visit her former sanctuary. Seeing her now, Soledad's former Mother Superior can't reconcile the glamorous woman in front of her with the nun she once knew. Soon after this scene, with eyes still fixated on Montiel on screen, the boys begin pleasuring one another under the cover of darkness.

This scene, from Pedro Almodóvar's *La mala educación* (*Bad Education*, 2004), epitomizes the spirit of what this dissertation will term "queer film fandom." Alone at the movies, sharing a decidedly *queer* attachment to Montiel and to one another, Almodóvar's schoolboys skirt the line between impish innocence and adult sexuality. The Spanish director tellingly cuts between the boys' wide-eyed faces illuminated by the glare

of the screen and their silhouetted backs once their hands reach over to one another, with Montiel's face looming over them. This juxtaposition, between the earnest engagement of the boys with the over-the-top melodrama projected on the big screen and the covert yet quite public queer sexuality that the scene depends on, brings together the discourses that surround the complex relationship gay men have had with cinema throughout the twentieth century and which are the focus of this dissertation. Here is a scene of gay diva worship<sup>1</sup> — note the familiarity of using Montiel's first name — prime for the type of camp sensibility that understands queer spectatorship “largely through imaginary or displaced relations to the images and discourses of a straight, ‘parent’ culture” (Ross 323). Ignacio and Enrique would, in this understanding, find themselves attached to Montiel in a dissident way that would allow them to circumvent the identification they're denied by not wanting to *be* the male/hero of the narrative that classic cinema presents to them. Instead they align themselves with Montiel (acknowledging her star persona by referring to her by name while also being engrossed by the plot she currently inhabits). But this is also a scene of lurid movie theaters, evocative of a cruising culture where cinema becomes a (homo)sexually coded space that bridges the gap between public and private, allowing for the ephemeral intimacy of clandestine sex acts. Almodóvar follows this moment with another scene of homosexual tension in the cover of darkness within another popular cruising space: the public bathroom. It is there they're caught by Father Manolo, further underscoring how these schoolboys' interactions can be read as invoking a sexual underground that requires and is shaped by its necessary bridging of public and private spaces.

Neither of these descriptions — on the one hand a vision of these schoolboys campily enjoying and appropriating Montiel’s star image, and on the other, a vision of them indulging in an outlaw sexual practice — encapsulates what Almodóvar’s scene accomplishes. Instead, with its piquant style that cross-cuts between the two, Almodóvar insists on presenting this moment as a collision of these two seemingly distinct discourses.

That moment at the movie theater, coded and later punished as shamefully *queer* by Father Manolo, is emblematic of the spirit of the literary texts that make up the canon of this project. Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), Gore Vidal’s *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), John Rechy’s *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* (1977), and Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (*El beso de la mujer araña*, 1976, English translation 1979) all emerge as literary precursors to the “kind of intimate and private education” (Russo 64) that cinema offered Almodóvar and his two Spanish schoolboys. The ‘bad education’ of the film’s ironic title is inextricably linked to homosexual desire and film fandom. And, just like the religious education Ignacio and Enrique rebuke (the former admitting he’s lost his faith and therefore his fear of hell, the latter anointing himself a hedonist early in the film), this bad education becomes a life-long commitment to creating art that actively speaks to and about those seemingly shameful childhood memories at the cinema. In order to begin sketching what I mean by a “queer film fan” and explaining the cultural work such a figure can play in understanding twentieth century gay fiction, I want to pause on Almodóvar and his schoolboys for a bit longer to illuminate the purpose of this project and its intervention.



Love of cinema brings these two young boys together and decisively influences their eventual careers. Both convert their fascination with those figures up on screen into artistic endeavors: Ignacio grows up to be a Montiel drag impersonator while Enrique becomes a film director. In this way, Enrique and Ignacio function as surrogates for Almodóvar himself whose career has been marked by examining his twinned interest on queer sexuality and cinema appreciation. It was during his time at a Catholic school not unlike that depicted in the film that the Spanish director turned to cinema to inoculate the bad education of what he called the “susurro pastoso y baboso de mi director espiritual” (the squalid and slimy whisperings of my spiritual director, *Patty Diphusa* 174, my translation): “Si por ver *Johnny Guitar*, *Picnic*, *Esplendor en la hierba* o *La gata sobre el tejado de zinc* yo merecía el infierno, no tenía otra alternativa que aceptar el calor de su incendio” (If watching *Johnny Guitar*, *Picnic*, *Splendor in the Grass* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* I deserved to go to hell, I had no alternative but to embrace the heat of its embers, *Patty Diphusa* 174, my translation). Already fascinated by Hollywood films that spoke about illicit and disruptive desires and which featured strong female roles amidst queer subtext (staples of Almodóvar’s own filmography), young Pedro would eventually mobilize his own attachment to these films in creating a rich vocabulary that would (like Ignacio and Enrique) recreate those pivotal moments at the movies.

Almodóvar’s early filmography is full of references and moments where cinema foreshadows, refracts and explains character motivations and plot turns. From Maria and Diego watching *Duel in the Sun* (1946) in *Matador* (1986), to Pepa dubbing Joan Crawford’s lines in *Johnny Guitar* (1954) in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*

(*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, 1988) these films gleefully welcome conversations about the influence of Hollywood cinema on the Spanish auteur. What becomes clear when one examines these films through this lens though, is that his interest in cinema as a subject matter and as a medium is less about intellect than about emotional investment. “Cinema is always present in my films,” he argues, “but I’m not the kind of cinephile director who quotes other directors. Certain films play an active part in my scripts. When I insert an extract from a film, it isn’t an homage but outright theft. It’s part of the story I’m telling and becomes an active presence rather than an homage, which is always something passive” (*Almodóvar on Almodóvar* 47). Almodóvar’s focus on the way films play an “active part” in his own filmography is precisely what makes the word “cinephile” an ill-fitting concept to apply to his own work. His films may embody what Susan Sontag referred to as “the very specific kind of love that cinema inspired” (SM60), but while for Sontag this was intrinsically tied to cinephilia, I want to suggest that Almodóvar — like the various authors and artists that make up this project’s canon — is better defined by fandom rather than that more academic concept.<sup>2</sup> In refusing Sontag’s word “cinephile” and embracing the word “fan,” my project embraces the unabashedly uncritical stance of this figure, one rooted in textual absorption and emotional investment, privileging the very act of theft Almodóvar so prizes and which makes such a crucial part of the active participation that defines fandom in general. As Samantha Barbas, whose *Movie Crazy* book traces the history of Hollywood fandom notes, the “story of film fandom, in large part, is the story of the way that fans refused to accept mass culture passively and, instead, became actively involved in their entertainment” (4). Fans,

whether by collecting autographs or amassing movie magazines, by writing fan-fiction or crafting elaborate cosplay, have defined themselves as pop cultural thieves, actively inserting themselves into the worlds, narratives, and characters they so treasure.

More than mere semantics, the difference between fandom and cinephilia touches upon issues of affect that cinephilia has thus far ignored, especially as this connects to the disenfranchised image *of fans*. Looking at these authors and texts through the discourse of fandom allows me to explore the dimension of deviance that has always permeated its discourse (both as self-identifying label as well as a coded put-down). If, as Jodi Jenson writes, the “literature on fandom is haunted by images of deviance” (9) and it is “associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race. (Fiske 30), it follows that an embrace of it as a focal point for this dissertation will allow me to examine the way these gay authors can be seen as queer fans. This, then, is also what sets them apart from the type of cinephiles Sontag is thinking about and the type of thinkers that academics who use that framework configure *as* cinephiles, people and critics whose very platform already places them within a knowing, privileged position.

A turn to the last moments of Richard Dyer’s *Stars*, a key text on cinema spectatorship, further elucidates the way queer film fandom skirts the line between the rigorous criticism of cinephilia and the earnest pleasures of fandom. “The emphasis on this book has been on analysis and demystification,” Dyer notes,

and I would defend this emphasis to the last. However, we should not forget that what we are analyzing gains its force and intensity from the way it is experienced, and that ideology shapes the experiential and affective as much as the cognitive. When I see Marilyn Monroe I catch my breath; when I see Montgomery Clift I sigh over how beautiful he is; when I see Barbara Stanwyck, I know that women are strong. I don't want to privilege these responses over analysis, but equally I don't want, in the rush to analysis, to forget what it is that I am analyzing. And I must add that, while I accept utterly that beauty and pleasure are culturally and historically specific, and in no way escape ideology, nonetheless they are beauty and pleasure and I want to hang on to them in some form or another. (184-185)

Dyer, a gay man himself wants the central conceit of his star-centered study to be driven by the “beauty and pleasure” of these stars without bracketing off the necessary analytical work he produces. Monroe, Clift and Stanwyck also implicitly code Dyer's own study as inherently queer, all of them pointing to self-created images, what John Rechy (my focus on chapter three) comes to term “masterpiece(s) of artifice elevated to art” (Castillo 122), and, in the case of Clift, speaking to the open secret of male homosexuality on screen. It is through these stars that Dyer indexes fan practices in general, but *gay* fan practices in particular. What Dyer's disclaimer points us to is the anxiety he alleges he is supposed to feel about those sighs and baited breaths these movie stars incite in him. The defensiveness in Dyer's words stems from a knowledge that these responses to Clift and Stanwyck (especially coming from an adult man let alone an academic) are to be understood as shameful. As Chad Bennet points out “gay fan practices suggest an even deeper relation to shame than in nongay fandoms” (29). As he notes, “in a suspicious climate where *any* textual absorption or emotional investment in a text — let alone unbridled fan enthusiasm — tends to be seen as shamefully uncritical, queer fandom

doubly exposes itself to shame” (29). This is precisely what Dyer’s concluding paragraphs identify and defend, and what the following chapters take as a foundational claim of the engagement of these authors with studio Hollywood and its stars. There will be analysis, but there will also be sighs, and while we may be tempted to think of that emotional response as shameful (this is, after all, an academic project), the characters and authors that populate this dissertation encourage us to revel in the “experiential and affective as much as the cognitive.”

A return to the schoolboys’ scene in *La mala educación* helpfully illustrates why this distinction between cinephile and fan is crucial and why Almodóvar’s film is an apt entry point into the discursive and aesthetic confines of this project. I want to pause on this matryoshka doll of a scene precisely because in its various remediations, it speaks directly to the way childhood memories that mingle film fandom and sexuality get rewritten and represented in the texts this dissertation will be studying. Almodóvar’s schoolboy scene, which I have been talking about as if it were a simple flashback in the film, is instead presented as a fictional recreation doubly mediated by the film’s structure. *La mala educación* actually begins in the 1980s with a man claiming to be Ignacio visiting Enrique at his production company, urging him to read his short story “La visita.” The autobiographical story details Ignacio’s return to his old village as a transsexual Montiel impersonator who calls herself Zahara. There, she meets with Father Manolo at his old Catholic school, in essence borrowing the very plot of the scene we glimpse from *Esa mujer*. This we see played out as Enrique reads the story: Zahara hopes to blackmail Father Manolo with, not coincidentally, a short story titled “La visita” where she has

written down the priest's indiscretions with him as a young boy. We then plunge *into* Zahara's short story as Father Manolo reads on and we see young Ignacio and Enrique at school. The scene at the movies ("I owe my best memories to the Olympo Cinema," the narrator of the story informs us) is part of this second nested narrative and is visually presented to us as distinct from the rest of the film by being shot and projected in a different ratio.<sup>3</sup> It is only once we reach Ignacio's short story's climax (where Father Manolo and another priest murder Zahara before she can publish her libelous text) that we learn that what we've been witnessing is, in fact, Enrique's film. The man claiming to be Ignacio (Gael García Bernal), who we have also seen playing Zahara, is actually Ignacio's younger brother, Angel, who conspired with Manolo (outside of Ignacio's fiction, a defrocked priest-turned-publisher) to let Ignacio's drug problem end in an overdose, and who hoped to impersonate him long enough to convince Enrique to cast him in the film (an achievement that we see play out as García's Angel also plays Zahara — and thus, Ignacio — in Enrique's film). Twice removed, the story of Ignacio, Enrique and Father Manolo in the 1960s is initially presented as unreliably rooted in their older counterparts' memories. Yet the last act of *La mala educación* reveals them to have been cinematic re-tellings of a fictionalized version of those childhood memories. Cinema's ability to inspire and recreate scenes of queer sexuality becomes both subtext and text in Almodóvar's film. While his later films have been criticized for being "made not of flesh and blood, but of celluloid" (Holl), the distinction between the corporeal and the cinematic have instead become irrevocably intertwined in Almodóvar's late filmography. Memories *of* and *at* the cinema become indistinguishable *from* cinema itself.

*La mala educación* is also an appropriate text with which to open discussions this project will engage in, because it is in essence an autobiography. Every text in this dissertation rewrites biographical scenes of queer film fandom. From Williams's re-presenting his family drama in *The Glass Menagerie* as a screened memory to Rechy's use of a hustler alter-ego in a "prose documentary" in *The Sexual Outlaw*, the texts in this project mobilize what Christian Keathley calls "the new historicist anecdote" ("the precise verbal-discursive equivalent of a cinephiliac moment" [140]). Studying closely Williams's childhood movie theater outings, Vidal's Warner Bros.-inspired war games, Rechy's lustful attachment to male stars, and Puig's afternoon movie dates with his mother growing up, each chapter seeks to "write a counter-factual history" (140) of these authors' investments in cinema as an evocative and transformational cultural moment.

Almodóvar's film brings together discourses of queer sexuality and gay fandom that his past films had only ever suggested. Indeed, his director protagonist in *La ley del deseo* (1987) had already visually connected writing films with tragic queer desire, a trope that *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) would return to, featuring an aspiring gay writer obsessed with Hollywood getting run over. These issues become central to Almodóvar's 2004 film, which as it turns out, is an adaptation of his *own* short story titled "La visita."<sup>4</sup> Deposited in the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid in 1975 for copyright purposes, Almodóvar's short story has never been published yet he's spoken openly about the way the plot therein has been repurposed for his fifteenth film. Here is a summary of "La visita" written in 1994 (a full decade before *La mala educación* was released) from Paul Julian Smith's monograph on the Spanish auteur, *Desire Unlimited*:

A young woman returns to a seminary in rural Extremadura dressed as Dietrich in *The Devil is a Woman*. She has come to announce the death of her brother, aged twenty-four, to the priest who had taken a particular interest in him. When the priest complains of her ‘excessive frivolity’ she replies: ‘I adore frivolity; I could not live without it.’ And surely, she continues, the prostitution she practices is less harmful than the conduct of priests who violate children’s bodies in the name of God? The priest blanches. Two endings: the ‘sister’ reveals s/he is the abused brother in drag, and swishes out, vengeance complete. Or, the priest kills the young ‘woman’, only to discover that it is his beloved student who has returned to him. (1)

Already in this early draft Almodóvar has made his queer protagonist keenly connect the illicit desire of the priest with his own film fandom. With its embrace of “excessive frivolity” as well as its invocation of Dietrich and Josef Von Sternberg’s 1935 film, Almodóvar’s short story indexes a campy register but queers it further by locating in it a noir genre, with vengeance or death determining the ending of his protagonist. Just as he does in his film, Almodóvar uses cinema to further underscore the queerness of his short story; the young (wo)man’s frivolity indexes both her fascination with cinema but also her gender and sexual fluidity.

The protagonist of Almodóvar’s short story, who in his cinematic adaptation forsakes Dietrich for a more staunchly Spanish star in Montiel, uses Dietrich to negotiate and perform his femininity. David Caron, who confesses that as a teenage boy he wanted to *be* Marlene Dietrich, notes that “identifying with a glamorous screen legend was at once a very empowering feeling and a feeling of self denying shame” (118). Of course this is already a failed identification. “If queer kids are directly or indirectly pressured to be someone else,” Caron suggests we take up Dietrich as a fabulous alternative and “instead of trying to *be* someone else, queer kids [should try] *being* someone else” (118),



a key semantic distinction that is recreated in the title of this project. Caron’s insight that “queer lives are a matter of troping” (118) — an argument that suggests at once a submission *to* but also a keen understanding *of* the process of identification — is not unlike David Halperin’s assertion that “long before they ever have sex... young people have genre” (*How to be Gay* 343). In this, Almodóvar’s short story and its later cinematic incarnation asks us to go beyond well-known theorizations of gay men’s identification with Hollywood icons which depend on their very failure to produce alternate camp and queer sensibilities, and instead see their productivity in getting queer fans to understand how those very failures are an empowering feeling and a feeling of self denying shame.

In choosing Dietrich (or Montiel), these young queer Almodóvar boys “forge certain non-standard relations to normative sexual and gender identities,” thus refusing the “pressing social invitation to assume a conventional, heteronormative positioning and they effectively acquire non-standard sexual and gender identities, identification, and orientations” (Halperin 343). This is the element of queer fandom which structures the work of Williams, Vidal, Rechy, and Puig that I study in the following chapters. The use of Dietrich and her particular brand of performative femininity in Von Sternberg’s Spanish-set film *The Devil is a Woman* is visually repurposed in *La mala educación* though its mobilization — at once used to index Spain as well as her queer allure — is differently presented. When we first encounter Zahara (in Ignacio’s short story, and thus embodied in Gael García Bernal<sup>5</sup>) she is wearing a skin-colored mermaid dress designed specifically for him by Jean Paul Gaultier, a regular Almodóvar collaborator. The dress, made to resemble a naked woman (with sequined nipples and a triangular piece of furry

fabric to denote a vagina) speaks to the ways Almodóvar understands gender identity as performative and fluid;<sup>6</sup> stylized and — as he writes in his short story — “excessively frivolous.”

Zahara’s performance at the bar —she lip-syncs to a Montiel recording of “Quizás, quizás, quizás” — is not quite legible as the kind of campy humor of drag queens. Instead there is a reverence for the excessive frivolity that her dress represents. Almodóvar’s Zahara beckons and refutes claims of authenticity (her friend Paquito introduces her as “la auténtica, la inimitable”). This transexual femme fatale (we later see that Zahara remains anatomically male) does not inspire laughter, nor does García Bernal’s performance depend on a caricature *of* gender performance which dominates so much of academic discussions of drag queens. Much like earlier Almodóvar trans\* heroines, Zahara is a walking paradox of artifice and authenticity. As Agrado notes in *Todo sobre mi madre*, “it costs a lot to be authentic. And one can’t be stingy with these things because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being.” Zahara is both dream and reality, authenticity and artifice, both at the fictional level and metafictional one, with Almodóvar’s makeup and costuming (including Gautier’s dress) insisting we see her *as* a made-up woman despite knowing she remains squarely a man in García Bernal’s lithe yet male body.

While his early work is quite clearly steeped in camp and pop, by 1990, his reputation for exploring and exploding the world of drag in a different register was already being spoken about in terms of its cinematic referents: “Over the past decade,

Almodovar's work has become more precisely drag (and less simply parody or satire). Drag does not call on or embellish real women; it enlarges women who are already distortions or theaters of femininity, like Tallulah Bankhead, Judy Garland, Maria Callas and the rest of the pantheon" (Pally 84). In the decade that followed, Almodóvar would engage in further discussion about these "theaters of femininity," precisely by continuing to plunder Hollywood iconicity. In this sense, his career trajectory, which begins with the camp of *Pepi, Luci, Bom y las otros chicas del montón* (1980) and its "general erection" competition, and resulted in the international success of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988) where the candy-colored decor and outrageous plot involving a scorned lover, a hunky terrorist, and a spiked gazpacho, finds itself leading into a more sustained engagement with cinema as a form. Thus, if Almodóvar "seems to abandon here [*Tacones lejanos* (1991)] that sense of ironic distance typical of him" (Smith 132) it is because that film in particular (and those that would follow it) insists on a screened reality, an argument Paul Julian Smith further develops when he quotes David Thompson's *Sight and Sound* review of that pivotal 1991 film, who argues that the film is "strangely adrift [in] a vague Euroland only found in front of the camera" (132).

If Almodóvar can serve as a template for the argument of this project, it is because his filmography shows us how a childish (and child-like) fascination with American cinema and American movie stars can be understood as having created, not the type of ironized or campy engagement which has so far been so widely hailed as the de facto way of configuring gay spectatorship, but a queer film fandom. The pervasive "glossy deracination" (Thompson 132) in the Douglas Sirk-influenced *Tacones lejanos* — another

film that used another drag queen aptly named Femme Letal — is not a mere abstraction into references and irony, but a deep engagement with the plots and characters of the Sirkian melodramas Almodóvar grew up with, so as to imagine new cultural and political possibilities for them in a contemporary situation. Camp is an inadequate framework with which to look at queer movie fandom precisely because camp usually elides the very affection *for* film that is inherent in fandom. Indeed, even the clichéd language of fandom — which speaks of unbridled enthusiasm — indicates that fandom defines itself in its excesses of desire and affect. Lost in the discourse of camp are the earnest pleasures of moviegoing. I locate these pleasures in childhood memories that predate (and at times ignore) gay sexual practices altogether, even as the narrative that emerges is one that begins with an awe-struck child at the talkies and ends with a lurking queer figure in dimly-lit movie theaters.

This looking back (to childhoods, to studio films, to postwar literature) is motivated and encouraged by the recent trend in queer scholarship to reclaim the various embarrassing and shame-filled pasts that have been closeted and otherwise forgotten in attempts at legitimizing and sanitizing LGBT identities. In Heather Love's words, this project hopes to "develop a politics of the past" (21), exploring these queer experiences in movie theaters later imprinted on literary texts. Each chapter, like this introduction, begins with images of children awestruck and seduced by the queer pleasures of movie watching and follows those children as they grow up to be artists intent on recreating that scene at the movies in their literary texts, creating literary equivalents of Almodóvar's schoolboys scene. Through this looking back at the childhood memories at the cinema,

this project provides what Jose Esteban Muñoz refers to as a “backward glance that enacts a future vision” (*Cruising Utopia* 4), pursuing the question of whether there might be “something queer about fandom in general, given its shamed status” (Bennett 18).<sup>7</sup> If we have indeed “assiduously closeted” the “secret shame and solitary pleasures of our sentimentality” (Halperin 95), a pleasure we permit ourselves “only on condition of melancholy or ironic discretion” (Miller 27), the four chapters that follow, offer examples of writers who mobilized said pleasures in creating the literary texts this dissertation examines.

It is no surprise that Almodóvar’s most successful film would frame itself in terms of these powerful disidentifications. *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) not only borrowed its title from Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s 1950 film *All About Eve*<sup>8</sup> but it outright stole various plot strands from Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, that film is centered on another young queer film fan, one whose death sets the plot in motion. It is Esteban’s fascination with cinema which opens the film (he’s watching *All About Eve* with his mother) and his fandom which leads to his untimely death (he’s struck by a car while trying to get an autograph from the actress playing Blanche DuBois in a Spanish theatre production he’d just seen). Almodóvar emerges as both beginning and end-point of this project, his films reaching back to Mankiewicz and Williams and achieving critical success in the 1980s, enough to be considered a contemporary of Manuel Puig.

If we are “all members or offspring of that first rising generation of movie-made children whose critical emotional and cognitive experiences did in fact occur in movie

theaters” (Sklar 139), Almodóvar and the authors that populate this dissertation asks us to examine the movie-made children whose experiences in movie theaters shaped them into the queer artists they became. Indeed, this is precisely what B. Ruby Rich envisioned in 1993 in the inaugural issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* when she called for us to exhume memories like that of Derek Jarman who remembered how much the Italian cinema of Pasolini and Visconti “meant to be him as a young faggot” (86). At the center of my project are four figures whose memories of childhoods spent in movie theaters in the middle of the century would come to inform their fantasy life as young boys and aesthetic practice as established writers. What ties the project together is the way those awe-struck boys enact a rather *queer* relationship with cinema. Rather than empty the term “queer” of its sexual specificity, my dissertation mines its own definitional indeterminacy to explore the way sexuality is linked to formal experimentation.

While the project begins with biographical tableaus, each chapter is centered on a single figure: Williams’s Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), Vidal’s eponymous *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), Rechy’s Jim in *The Sexual Outlaw: A Prose Documentary* (1977), and Puig’s Molina in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (*El beso de la mujer araña*, 1976, English translation 1979). A sensitive poet, an Amazonian transsexual, an effeminate queen, a sexual outlaw: my project explores a small group of characters that are hard to categorize as legibly “gay,” and who belong more squarely within the confines of the protean label “queer.” Thus, if “gay/lesbian audiences function as a limit-case, as an ideal testing ground for the notion of critical spectatorship, not in

the sense of ‘informed’ viewing but in the sense of the possibility of ‘contestatory’ and ‘radical’ viewing” (Mayne 165), I want to present queer film fandom as a way to understand these critical spectators alongside the understanding of cinema as a site of queer “fascination and love” (*Tendencies* 3), a place that, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s words might have offered many a queer child a weapon for survival, giving them the “ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us” (3).

My first chapter argues that Tennessee Williams’s curious childhood desire to climb into the screen and join the action is the very structural conceit of his play, *The Glass Menagerie*. An example of a character whose relation to cinema has been widely read as euphemistic of his queer sexuality, Tom seems to present an instance of cinema’s metaphorical function as a mirror in queer subject formation. My chapter challenges this reading by taking Tom’s late-night movie trips literally. I connect his desire to be part of the movies to the way the original production’s mise-en-scène and Williams’s usually ignored stage directions call for the stage to function *as* a screen. Tom’s absorption and emotional investment in cinema, while tied to his queer sexuality, doesn’t merely connote it but formally echoes it. This makes him the quintessential movie fan the dissertation examines.

Chapter two uses Gore Vidal’s eponymous protagonist *Myra Breckinridge* to examine another protagonist whose queer secret (in this case her transsexuality) gets

grafted onto her own obsession with Hollywood. At once a camp icon and an amateur film critic obsessed with Parker Tyler's writings on studio Hollywood, Myra at once presents and disputes readings of queer film fandom as necessarily premised on the critical distance and ironic detachment of camp. Myra's female body and mannerisms are designed to emulate Hollywood starlets, and her characterization (especially in the ill-fated cinematic adaptation that followed) have labeled her a camp figure. My chapter works to redress these readings by placing Myra's gender and filmic imitations within the larger conversation the novel stages about the failed possibility of literary psychological realism in a post-cinema world. Together, these two chapters locate queer identities as both created and dependent on the promise of Hollywood fantasy, but offer alternate models of theorizing cinema's relationship with queer spectators.

My first two chapters focus on narratives of characters whose queerness is formally and thematically intertwined with their film fandom. Tom's absorption and emotional investment in cinema, while tied to his queer sexuality, doesn't merely connote it but formally echoes it. This makes him the quintessential movie fan the dissertation examines while Myra is cinema fandom incarnate. Whereas my first two chapters center on recognizable figures of queer fandom, the dissertation's second half explores the potential for queer fandom as a reading practice. From the Hollywood backlots that Myra wishes to infiltrate (and which frame her return in Vidal's sequel, *Myron* [1974]), my third chapter turns to the Los Angeles back alleys where John Rechy sets his cruising novel, *The Sexual Outlaw*. Known for his controversial first novel, *City of Night* (1963), Rechy is a Chicano gay writer whose reputation as a documenter of the seedy sexual



underworld of hustlers and tricks has set the tone for discussions about his work.

Interrogating this characterization, my chapter takes up the text's subtitle ("A prose documentary") as a way to analyze the novel's generic and formal choices. While tracing the continuities between this text and his earlier bestselling novels, my chapter locates this genre-bending novel in the context of the boom in LGBT documentaries of the time. Putting Rechy's text in conversation with the contemporaneous documentary, Peter Adair's *Word is Out* (1977) I establish *The Sexual Outlaw* as both a response to and a parody of these landmark films, specifically by shedding light on the invisible and oft-forgotten outcasts of the LGBT community, namely those young, lower-classed outlaws who cruise and define themselves against the white and affluent "Mr. Middle of the Road" trope so exalted in Adair's documentary. My chapter presents a queer film fan who quite literally enters the picture by framing his own cruising life as a documentary, with voice-over and montage chapters.

My last chapter presents Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a novel that both represents and performs the figure of the queer film fan. Rather than rehearse the common argument that a camp repurposing of Hollywood films motivates Puig's fiction, my chapter begins with young Manuel's endless trips to see American movies with his mother in rural Argentina and with his childish desire "que todo el dia fuera cine." The indeterminacy of this sentence (that the entire day *were* a movie, that the entire day *were like* a movie), I argue, is what Puig accomplishes in the dialogues between Molina and his straight cellmate Valentín in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. I read Molina's detailed film retellings against the novel's footnoted (Anglo-American) psychoanalytic histories of

homosexuality and Valentín's revolutionary Argentinean politics to stress the way Puig embeds a keen critical outlook in the seeming banalities and details of those film retellings—without dismissing the escapist and enjoyable quality of cinema itself.

Rechy and Puig both turn to cinema's aesthetic to present their politically inflected arguments. This choice is strategic. For Rechy, the turn to documentary filmmaking seems well suited to the type of work he had been characterized with. But, by taking the prose documentary label seriously, he immediately signals to his readers a level of construction even as what he represents is purportedly real. Here we might pause and note that Rechy chooses to specify it as a *prose* documentary, clearly aligning it with cinema rather than with journalistic documentarian practices, thus calling into question the very modes of representation he models in his text. Citing the aesthetics of documentaries — with voice-overs, montages and an impersonal narrator that constantly mirrors an objective camera in its recording of graphic sexual encounters — Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw* manages to present his outlaw sensibility within a framework that valorizes itself as “*evidence from the world [which] legitimates its usage as a source of knowledge*” (Nichols ix). Puig on the other hand, takes as one of his premises the assumption that cinema is an escape from reality. Molina embodies this belief, even telling Valentín that telling him about films makes him forget the “filthy cell” they share (17). Yet, as its ending attests, an engagement with politics does not preclude the experience of losing oneself in the movies. The vision of the Spider Woman in Valentín's cinematic drug-induced dream is what helps his resolve to not betray his fellow revolutionaries while Molina's presumed death for “a just cause” gets framed as a death

of a film heroine. *El beso de la mujer araña* presents cinema as a necessary axis through which to discuss and enter discussions of revolutionary and identity politics. During a decade that saw an increase in visibility, due not only to the Stonewall riots but also to the end of the Motion Picture Production Code as well as the Supreme Court's decision to relax censorship on printed materials,<sup>10</sup> Rechy and Puig's works present an enlightening case study in the ways queer writers were approaching and appropriating cinematic aesthetics to advance political arguments about sexuality and revolution. The turn to cinema in both cases hinges on a level of identification with the figures on the screen — whether they be glamorous projections of who Puig wanted to be or the stark, truthful portrayals Rechy wished he could watch — as well as the acknowledgment that by the 1970s LGBT images (not merely portrayals or depictions) needed to enter cultural conversations in ways that upended recognized clichés and stereotypes (the effeminate male and the promiscuous hustler).

Studying twentieth-century literature through the lens of film studies and queer theory, “Being in the Picture” stages an interdisciplinary conversation that posits queer film fandom as a way to move away from current theorizations of queer spectators. Movie fandom, usually dismissed as a way to name an unserious and vacuously emotional type of engagement with cinema, is here presented as a way to theorize engagements with cinema that go beyond mere camp or appropriation. Building on the affective turn in queer theory and recuperating the various pleasures these authors found in cinema while growing up, “Being in the Picture” explores the ways this very engagement with cinema was formally registered in twentieth century queer literature.

Thus, while fandom seems like a mere overlooked biographical detail in the lives of the authors that make up my canon, my project uses it to stage conversations both about literary form and queer spectatorship.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In his book *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, Daniel Harris spends some time exploring the nature of gay diva worship. “For us [gay men],” he writes,

film serves a deeply psychological and political function. At the very heart of gay diva worship is not the diva herself but the almost universal homosexual experience of ostracism and insecurity, which ultimately led to what might be called the aestheticism of maladjustment, the gay man’s exploitation of cinematic visions of Hollywood grandeur to elevate himself above his antagonistic surroundings and simultaneously express membership in a secret society of upper-class aesthetes. (Harris 10)

While Harris’s bracketing off “the diva herself” may, in fact, be missing the point of that very attachment, he does point to the recurring argument that the gay man’s turn to Hollywood (and its divas) is precisely about an individualizing gesture even as it depends on a sense of a burgeoning community.

<sup>2</sup> As Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener write in the introduction to their edited collection titled *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, cinephilia “came to full bloom in the 1960s thanks to the success of the Nouvelle Vague in France and abroad, but also the lively debates in the film magazines *Postif*, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the discussions by the cinephiles congregating around the Cinema MacMahon and other Parisian movie houses” (11). For this, the term belies its own philology by focusing less on the “love” it presumes to describe, but instead on the dogmatic agendas of the young French film critics (Godard, Truffaut, Rohmer) whose work aimed to construct an “omniscient *cinéphile*” “that became central to the (elitist) mode of film reception known as cinephilia” (11).

<sup>3</sup> The bulk of the film is presented in Cinemascope (2.35:1 aspect ratio) but this changes whenever we enter scenes from “La visita” when Almodóvar shifts to Widescreen (1.85:1 aspect ratio). This visual distinction is one of the many clues Almodóvar offers throughout the film to show that what we are watching is, in fact, Enrique’s film. The widescreen ratio, for example, is the standard ratio for films today, while the Cinemascope ratio (which is used for the framing scenes in the film’s narrative), created using anamorphic lenses, was widely used in the late 1950s and 1960s. By drawing attention to these aspect ratios (at one point we also see Ignacio’s younger brother play with a Super 8 camera, the footage of which we briefly see on screen in 1.35:1 aspect ratio) further alerts us to the materiality of the film we are watching, making any distinction between what is Enrique’s film and Almodóvar’s own a needless one, both equally enamored with the fictive possibilities of the medium.

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<sup>4</sup> As Smith notes, Almodóvar had already plundered that short story for a scene in his 1987 film *La ley del deseo* where Tina (Carmen Maura playing a transsexual) goes to the church where she used to sing as a choir boy and confronts the priest who we are led to infer sexually abused her. While in *La mala educación* the confrontation is combative, Almodóvar's treatment in his earlier film is more melancholy. Tina confesses to the priest that there have only been two men in her life, her father and him ("my spiritual guide"), both of whom abandoned her. Urging Tina to return to God, the priest nevertheless invites her to run away from the memories housed in his church, as he has, in order to find peace and solace. Before storming out, she replies that those memories are all she has left.

<sup>5</sup> Once the film bridges the gap between the schoolboy romance and the current movie production setting, we meet Ignacio via Manolo's retelling of how he got involved with Angel. As Ignacio continued to blackmail him (in order to fund his various gender reassignment surgeries and procedures), Manolo fell in love with Ignacio's younger brother, an aspiring actor who saw in Manolo a way to unburden his mother of the shameful, drug-filled life Ignacio led while devising a plan to become a film star. Thus, the glamorous image of Zahara that Almodóvar presents is starkly opposed to the gaunt and disheveled image we see of the "real" Ignacio who's waiting to save up for his gender reassignment surgery and whose drug abuse has left him looking physically ill.

<sup>6</sup> Even before Judith Butler and early queer theory made these approaches mere platitudes, Almodóvar had been playing with gender performance, from Carmen Maura's aforementioned performance as Tina (whose own gender played metatextually against her portrayal, something further complicated by Almodóvar's decision to cast famed transsexual Bibí Andersen as Tina's lesbian lover whose daughter Tina is caring for throughout the film), to Miguel Bosé's part as a straight undercover cop who poses as a drag queen called Femme Letal in *Tacones lejanos* (1991). As Paul Julian Smith notes, "It seems unlikely that Almodóvar has a great interest in transsexuals per se; rather he is concerned with suspending that distinction between artifice and truth which has so oppressed sexual dissidents of all kinds" (87).

<sup>7</sup> In his article "Flaming the Fans: Shame and the Aesthetics of Queer Fandom in Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine*" Chad Bennet locates in fandom a queer bent, as it were, by focusing on the way both characterizations depend on and begin with scenes of shaming: "If the term 'queer' as Sedgwick proposes," he argues,

can be taken to refer primarily to "those whose sense of identity is for some reason tuned most durably to the note of shame... developing from this originary affect their particular structures of expression, creativity, pleasure, and struggle," then perhaps there is something queer about fandom in general, given its shamed status as — as Henry Jenkins argues — "scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire." (18-9)

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<sup>8</sup> Almodovar makes this clear in the scene that frames and offers the title screen and which introduces the audience to Manuela (Cecilia Roth) and Esteban (Eloy Azorín). As mother and son gather to watch the dubbed version of Mankiewicz's film, Esteban complains about the Spanish translation for the title of the film: *Eva al Desnudo* (*Eva Unveiled* as the English subtitles on the DVD track suggest, though 'al desnudo' suggests a kind of erotic nakedness as well). For Esteban, this is not a faithful translation:

ESTEBAN: *All About Eve* significa *Todo sobre Eva*.

MANUELA: *Todo Sobre Eva* suena raro.

[ESTEBAN: *All About Eve* should be *Todo sobre Eva*.

MANUELA: That sounds odd (As translated by the US DVD subtitles, though we could also translate it as "That sounds queer").]

At this moment Esteban picks up his notebook, the camera moves with Manuela to read over his shoulder but all we can see is 'TODO.' Then the screen becomes the paper itself, having Esteban's pen writing on its transparent surface. The film then receives its title from Esteban's pen: *Todo Sobre Mi Madre*. This moment of literal translation and intertextuality sets up the rest of the movie. This scene shows how even though Almodóvar is quite explicit about the ways in which texts will make their way into his film he also makes clear that there is a certain process of interpretation – of translation, even – that marks and filters them.

<sup>9</sup> Not only do we learn that Almodóvar's protagonist, Manuela, played Stella in an Argentinean production of Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*, while her then-husband (now a HIV positive transsexual) played Stanley, but it is right after a performance of Williams's play that Manuela loses her son in an accident, finding herself later becoming the assistant of the actress playing Blanche once she (like the touring production) moves to Barcelona. One night, when the actress who plays Stella cannot go on stage, it is Manuela who takes her place, allowing Almodóvar to actually further equate Manuela with Blanche's pregnant sister.

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<sup>10</sup> The Motion Picture Production Code was in place from 1934 to 1968. At the basis of the Code was the demand that “Evil and good are never to be confused throughout the presentation” (Sklar 174), so that any evil depicted in film be balanced out by some element of “good” (the “compensating moral value” formula). Going further, the Code also “went on to prohibit a vast range of human expression and experience” including homosexuality (174). At the heart of the Code’s rhetoric was the protection of America’s youth. With the advent of television and a new crop of titillating European films by Fellini and Bergman in the 1950s, the Code (and the tacit though instrumental role the Catholic Legion of Decency played in crafting and implementing its rules) began to suffer so that by 1968 the Code would be disbanded giving way to the rating system in place today. This allowed certain subject matters to be brought to the screen without following the Code’s formula, or needing to shroud them in euphemistic language. Similarly, the landmark *California v. Ferlinghetti* Supreme Court decision in 1957 was significant for the way it redefined “obscenity” when it came to printed materials. Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* — which Ferlinghetti had published and was arrested for — was found by the court to “have some redeeming social importance”; therefore not obscene and thus protected under the First Amendment). For the way this affected texts that dealt with homosexuality, see B.J. Distelberg’s “Mainstream Fiction, Gay Reviewers, and Gay Male Cultural Politics in the 1970s.”



## CHAPTER ONE

Queer Fandom and Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

Covering the rise of movies in the early twentieth century and its effect on those growing up with the burgeoning film industry, Robert Sklar in *Movie-Made America* (1975) wonders, “Are we not all members or offspring of that first rising generation of movie-made children whose critical emotional and cognitive experiences did in fact occur in movie theaters?” (139). By 1975, this question was perhaps a bit commonplace but no less relevant for it. The American movie industry was on the verge of its first renaissance since the pre-war era.<sup>1</sup> The question of the impact and influence of cinema on American moviegoers became more pressing as another overseas war (soon to be committed to the screen in *Apocalypse Now* [1979]), newly uncensored topics breached without the daunting prospect of adhering to the (by 1969 defunct) Motion Picture Production Code, and a new model of cinematic realism<sup>2</sup> began to make their way into movie theaters across the United States. It’s no surprise Sklar — like Henry James Forman, author of the 1935 study *Our Movie Made Children* before him, from whom he borrows his title — looks back at that first generation of American moviegoers who grew up with the “talkies” as a staple of American middle-class life as he builds an argument for the centrality of cinema in contemporary American culture.

One such movie-made child, and probably the most famous playwright one could describe in those terms, is Tennessee Williams. Born Thomas Lanier Williams in 1911 in St. Louis, which at the time boasted more movie theaters per capita than New York City (Hale 610), Williams grew up going to the movies quite often. His memoirs and personal notebooks are littered with casual remarks on films and stars he adored,<sup>3</sup> while his later playwrighting career is rife with attempts at incorporating cinema into his own play scripts both formally and thematically. This type of critical narrative is what R. Barton Palmer and William Robert Bray focus on briefly when they label him a “movie-made playwright” in their monograph on Williams’s centrality in postwar Hollywood cinema.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Barton and Palmer turn to Sklar himself to frame Williams’s “lifelong interest in, and...enthusiasm for, films and filmmaking” (16).

This chapter will trace this biographical and critical move from movie-made child to movie-made playwright, an analysis that will not only require looking at the profound ways Hollywood cinema affected Williams’s early life but the ways in which it pointedly affected his dramaturgy. To do this, this chapter will home in on the way Williams was a “childishly ardent movie fan” (Maxwell quoted in Yacowar 141), one who turned said fascination with cinema into the thematic and formal conceit of his first breakthrough play, *The Glass Menagerie*. That 1944 play centers on Tom Wingfield, a failed and frustrated poet imprisoned in a life inside the tenement apartment he shares with his domineering mother and disabled sister. Its explicit autobiographical features make it one of Williams’s most personal plays. But if the power of the piece owes much to the way the Southern playwright borrowed heavily from his relationship with Edwina and Rose

Williams, it is also a play born out of the movies. The play was originally envisioned as a rough sketch for a promising teleplay: “I feel this could be made into a very moving and beautiful screen play — much better than the stage version could be — only it would have to run unusually long, about as long, I should think, as *Gone With The Wind*” (*Notebooks* 370) he wrote to his agent upon submission of its initial treatment. Furthermore, *The Glass Menagerie* was written during Williams’ stint at “the movie-mill at MGM” (*Memoirs* 77), where he was tasked with writing the Lana Turner vehicle, *Marriage is a Private Affair* (1944), an assignment he all but ignored, before being summarily pulled from the project.<sup>5</sup> By framing this exploration of Williams’s fan engagement with cinema within his 1944 play, this chapter will connect Williams’s movie-made childhood with what’s been dubbed his use of cinematic and cinema-influenced technologies in order to investigate the queerness of his protagonist and play alike. My goal is to reconfigure the conversation that this early play has engendered as the “most cinematic” of Williams’s plays,<sup>6</sup> a description that elides more productive readings of Williams’s drama that focus on the affective relationship he had with cinema as a child and later as a playwright, born and expressed out of his own queer engagement with cinema and the theater.

Much of the conversation around Williams and film has centered on the one hand on the film adaptations of his plays, and on the other hand, on the conceit of seeing his plays as intrinsically “cinematic.” Williams’s affinity with cinema has often been understood in the terms Palmer and Bray use in their own study, by focusing on the films his plays beget. This is not surprising as the “Williams films” are a remarkable example

of the success of the studio film and studio stars of the 50s and 60s. Of the seventeen plays by Williams that were produced on Broadway between 1945 and 1970, eleven were turned into major studio films.<sup>7</sup> That these films overshadow his plays when discussing the intersection of cinema and his work is not surprising when one considers that this filmic canon boasts such names as Elizabeth Taylor, Katherine Hepburn, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift and Paul Newman, as well as the most respected directors of the time: Elia Kazan (*A Streetcar Named Desire*), Joseph L. Mankiewicz (*Suddenly Last Summer*) and Sidney Lumet (*The Fugitive Kind*). Indeed, Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) is often cited as the first "adult film" blockbuster and the first of the Williams films to openly fight against the Breen office and the Motion Picture Code,<sup>8</sup> further cementing the role of the Williams films in cinema history. This type of approach allows Maurice Yacowar as early as 1977 to state that Williams had the effect of "maturing the subject matter of American film" as well as providing "the first wide exposure to the techniques of the Actors Studio (The Method) and to its leading students" (139). Palmer and Bray, for example, provide an extensive look at the way "Williams's works played an important role within the unsettled and problematic evolution of the American cinema in the years immediately following the end of World War II" (27), focusing more on the films his plays inspired, rarely looking closely at the plays themselves.

The centrality of Williams to cinema history exists alongside the long-held notion that his plays both anticipated being adapted into films and were indebted to Hollywood itself. This discussion has centered on discussions of the ways Williams' dramaturgy was unilaterally influenced by cinema. One need not look far to find concrete evidence for

this claim. Williams's penchant for finding ways of incorporating cinema into his theater can be seen as early as his one-act plays. After watching Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), Williams found himself excitedly thinking about drama "in more plastic or visual terms" and he hoped to "write sparingly but with complete lyricism, and build" a play as "a series of dramatic pictures" (*Notebooks* 306). The play he had in mind (*The Spinning Song*), while never produced or published<sup>9</sup> is indicative of the way Williams's approach to the stage was heavily indebted to those days spent in darkened movie theaters. Later in 1943 (at the same time he was working on *The Spinning Song*), Williams was also attempting to write what he dubbed "the cat play," a dramatization of his own short story "The Malediction" in which he hoped to "create a sort of dramatic distillation of the quality appealing and lyrical elements of the early Chaplin screen comedies" (*Memoirs* 352). Much like *The Spinning Song*, this play — eventually retooled and retitled, *A Strange Kind of Romance* — never got produced but one of Williams's original ideas for it (that sub-titles would be "projected on a screen above or to the side of the stage set" [*Memoirs* 352]) became a crucial aspect of how he structured *The Glass Menagerie*, a play whose published script was accompanied by Williams's own "Production Notes," where he lays out a concrete example of how these early experiments led to the Wingfield play.

It is no surprise that *The Glass Menagerie* is the one play critics cite when discussing the playwright's cinematic techniques on stage. Yacowar, for example, singles out the "filmic flow" of the piece (9) while George Brandt does a cursory exploration of what makes Tom's staged memories an experiment in cinematic staging. Arguing that of

all American playwrights, it is Williams who “has most effectively learnt the lessons in freedom that the cinema has to teach” (123), Brandt focuses mostly on the use of screens while George W. Crandell suggests that,

The cinematic influence in *The Glass Menagerie* is most clearly evident in the figure of the narrator. With the aid of this device, Williams duplicates the motion-picture camera’s organizing point of view, adapts the shot-to-shot formation for the theater (fostering identification with a fictional character and replicated the cinematic process of suture), and adopts the patriarchal look that characterizes many of Hollywood’s classic films: a man gazing at a woman. (2-3)

Crandell’s reading of Tom-as-narrator (and thus as a cinematic eye/I) owes much to the psychoanalytic-inflected film theory of the late 1970s epitomized by Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” which argued that in narrative cinema, the “camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing movements compatible with the human eye, an ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject” (843-44). Crandell’s collapse of the narrator figure (a figure that owes much more to fiction than it does to cinema) and the role of the camera misses the point of what might be termed “cinematic” in Williams’s play. As these cinematic readings of *The Glass Menagerie* show, it is clear that Williams’s early play is indebted to cinema, especially in its form and production values. It is less relevant to my discussion *that* Williams uses cinematic techniques, than it is to ponder *why* he does so, and what that accomplishes on stage. The plastic elements of the play (the use of scrimms, screen titles and lighting) — all elements which have been accurately read as part of a larger trend in American theater to move away from naturalism and realism<sup>10</sup> —and which have been aligned with Williams’s protagonist (Tom is, after all, the narrator of the

piece, able to manipulate lights and scene changes at will), add up to creating in Williams's audience fleeting but necessary feelings of being *at* the movies as they witness a character intent of being *in* them. Similarly, *The Glass Menagerie* (and Williams' drama in general) has been faulted for its reticent treatment of sexuality. Summing up the accepted critical narrative on the play, Tony Kushner is able to authoritatively state in a recent introduction to the play that "apart from a couple of thin hints of sexual life either dreamed or attempted, Tom is guarded and demure" (24). This chapter will write back to these critical conversations by locating Tom's homosexuality and the play's coding of it with his moviegoing habits as indexing a more complicated and nuanced relationship between the movie-made child Williams was and the movie-made playwright he became, one that depends on seeing both Williams and Tom as "queer movie fans," figures whose fascination with cinema impels them to recreate the practice of moviegoing on the dramatic stage.

Dubbed a "memory play" by Williams himself, *The Glass Menagerie* focuses on the Wingfield family. In a tenement apartment in St. Louis, Tom provides for his mother Amanda and his sister Laura by working in a warehouse. A poet at heart, Tom loathes his job and turns instead to late nights of drinks and movies. The dramatic engine of the play is the arrival of one of Tom's co-workers for dinner who, Amanda hopes, will become Laura's "gentleman caller." Amanda sees this as the only way to shepherd her shy and sheltered daughter into a life outside their increasingly claustrophobic home life. Tom's role as a narrator provides him with the ability to summon memories from that particular evening while still keeping a running commentary from the vantage point of his present,

away from his mother and sister from whom he flees at the end of the play. At the heart of *The Glass Menagerie*, is a character whose connections with the seedy world of moviegoing set him up as a conduit through which to establish a connection between cinema, sexuality and drama. Tom becomes the figure of a queer movie fan, one who enables the play to evoke thematically and formally the scene of moviegoing. Williams book-ends Tom's entrance and exit from the memory-riddled Wingfield tenement apartment with dialogue that speaks to the inability to distinguish illusion and truth while evoking cinema through the lighting design of Jo Mielziner. Thus, Williams's decision to invoke cinema in his play as a placeholder for both Tom's dreams and sexuality brings up issues of what Tom, the "opposite of a stage magician" who gives us "truth in the guise of illusion" (4), finds and indulges in when, as he claims over and over throughout the play to the dismay of sister and mother alike, he "goes to the movies."

Tom's dreams aren't on screen as much as they are made possible in the space of the movie theater, a space the play constantly works to recreate on stage. Early in his life Williams is quoted as admitting, "I used to want to climb into the screen and join the action. My mother had to hold me down" (quoted in Maxwell 1). An example of Williams's "childishly ardent movie fandom" (Maxwell 1) this desire is central to the way I want to refashion the critical conversation around Williams's relationship with Hollywood cinema, away from a purely formal or influence-laden discussion and instead one concerned with the affective relationship Williams had with Hollywood. While it has been a less common approach, critics have tried to grapple with the "rich exchange



between Williams's stage and his film experience" (Yacowar 141) in ways that focus on his plays alone, but this is usually quickly followed with a caveat:

But he has never been the kind of film student that such writers as, say Harold Pinter and Alain Robbe-Grillet have been. Rather, Williams was a fan — an enthusiast, but *merely a fan*. Hence his friend's Gilbert Maxwell's confession that "To this day, Tenn and I are childishly ardent movie fans. We go to pictures together and always sit in the loge where we can whisper and laugh without disturbing too many people, or being summarily ejected for becoming helpless with glee when a film turns out to be unintentionally funny." Given Williams's genius, one might wish that he had explored the film medium with a more serious devotion. (141, emphasis added).

Immediately, this anecdote points us to the ways Williams's enthusiasm registers outside of what Yacowar terms "serious devotion." Williams's demeanor (with his laughter, his glee, his whispers) locates him outside the decorum usually expected at movie theaters (what would cause them to be ejected). It also codes Maxwell and Williams as aligned with a gendered response to what they are watching. If "the literature on fandom" is indeed "haunted by images of deviance" this is because it is associated with behaviors that seem "excessive, bordering on deranged" (Jenson 9), usually articulated around images of girlish excitement (howls of laughter, loud squeals). There is a gendered behavior associated with being deemed "merely a fan." More than that, Williams's anecdote also identifies another aspect of his cinema fandom when he prizes the company and the social scene associated with going to the movies. It is his gleeful encounter with Maxwell that fueled their childishly ardent fandom. These two aspects of Williams's anecdote are not easily understood within known theorizations of gay spectatorship; they don't point to any identificatory process nor to any queer decoding of Hollywood tropes.

The stress lies instead in the social environment *of* the theater. When Yacowar refers to Williams as “an enthusiast” and “merely a fan,” he does so to dismiss any critical work that may approach his drama through the lens of filmmaking, and especially filmgoing. Instead of merely pointing at this unserious devotion, I suggest looking at this gleeful scene quite seriously. To do this, we must examine the assumptions and implications that Yacowar invokes when he refers to Williams as *merely* a fan.

To label someone a fan is to already demand a prefatory phrase such as Yacowar’s “merely.” To use the word “fan” in relation to Williams is not only to acknowledge that there is a level of identification and emotional investment in Williams’s relationship with cinema, but also a desire to include and be included in cinema itself. As John Fiske puts it, “Fandom is typically associated with cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrates... It is thus associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race” (Fiske 30). The category that is missing from Fiske’s formulation is the one that will prove to be the most helpful in our discussion of Williams: sexuality. Of course, merely pointing at Williams’s sexuality is not enough to warrant placing homosexuality as a necessary category through which to explore his drama (let alone his investment in cinema). Yet, as we will see with *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams’s (at times oblique) treatment of sexuality in the figure of Tom, brings these two discourses together. Tom’s erotic orientation and affinity for cinema make him a vital character with which to understand how these two discourses (of sexuality and cinema) come together and are deployed thematically and formally. He, like Williams, is a queer movie fan.

Fan as a derogatory label dates back to the very beginnings of Hollywood. As Samantha Barbas puts it in *Movie Crazy*, the two iconic figures of early Hollywood fandom were the “frenzied mob and the silly schoolgirl” which, as she acknowledges, were figures that “existed at society’s margins.” Film fandom was “never truly a ‘normal’ activity” (3). Her own study aims to dispel these images of a fan by focusing instead on “activities too mundane for the press” that nevertheless showed a widespread notion of movie fans. But if we look again at the two figures Barbas presents us with (inspired and ratified, respectively, by Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* [1938] and Judy Garland’s *The Broadway Melody of 1938* [1938]) we find ourselves understanding why even if Williams was an enthusiast, he was still *merely* a fan. The frenzied mob of West’s novel and Garland’s silly schoolgirl are equally ridiculous and frightening. They represent unbridled desire for and because of what they witness on screen. Theirs is an attachment that overflows the very confines of the movie theater and which begins to blur the seemingly rigid distinction between who’s on screen and who’s in front of it.

What pushes Barbas to move away from the West and Garland figures is the way they present us with two figures that wish to own and consume (in ways literal and figural) the very cinema that fuels their desires. I want to pause and study the specific moment that showcases Garland’s silly schoolgirl fandom in order to examine the transgressive — queer, even — power of her own fandom, one which leads the way to the queer fandom we will identify in Williams’s own work. In the film, Garland plays a young performer named Betty looking for her big break who sings longingly about her fan-like attraction to Clark Gable in “You Made Me Love You (I Didn’t Want To Do It).”

As is evident by the title, the love song finds the speaker berating her lover for making her love him (“you made me love you and all the time you knew it”). The scene is set up during bedtime, when Betty’s mother finds her ogling an autographed Clark Gable picture, snaps it from her (“So you been writing to the actors again? Well I’ll put a stop to that!”) and tears it into pieces: “First it was Donald Duck and now it’s Clark Gable you’re crazy about. Now look here young lady, you stop looking at these movie picture actors and you go right to sleep! And mind you, no dreaming about them either!” This scene constitutes one of the earliest representations of movie fans on screen. With its invocation of irrepressible desire and the subsequent shaming it elicits from an authority figure who considers such attachments problematic and out of the norm, this scene from *Broadway Melody of 1938* continues to feel emblematic for the way it portrays an enduring stereotype of movie fans. More tellingly perhaps, the scene construes this moment of fan fascination within a performance. Betty waits until her mother is out of sight to take out a photo album filled with film star head shots, finds Gable’s and sings “You Made Me Love You (I Didn’t Want To Do It)” — a song whose own title embeds within itself the level of performativity inherent in film fandom that the scene depends on:

Dear, Mister Gable

I am writing this to you

And I hope that you will read it

So you know

My heart beats like a hammer

And I stutter and I stammer

Every time I see you at the picture show  
 I guess I'm just another fan of yours  
 And I thought I'd write and tell you so  
 Oh, oh, oh

Garland's character here aligns her unconstrained desire ("my heart beats like a hammer") with a physical and emotional response (the stutters and stammers) to the figure of Gable ("every time I see you at the picture show"). The song imagines Gable *making* Garland fall in love with him without doing much other than being at the movies. The song also has the effect of singularizing Garland's Betty amid a large mass of fans. She may be surrounded by throngs of people at the movies but Gable's image speaks to her alone. Embedded in the song is also a modesty which in itself echoes the shaming her mother models: Betty is "*just* another fan of" Gable. The modifier is important because despite that singularizing effect, Betty still understands that her fandom locates her in a decisively subservient relation to the glittering star she adores. And yet, her choice of star (Gable) and the song's insistence on his normality work to disrupt this seeming hierarchy. Betty is drawn to Gable for being, as the lyrics later suggest, "so natural like/Not a real actor, no but just like any fella/You'd meet at a school or at a party." The song, which is set up as a response to the moment of shaming performed by Betty's mother, acknowledges the transgressive nature of film fandom but not before offering up its pleasures and its possibilities, even when the framing scene cannot help but present "fan" as a negative stereotype.

More tellingly, perhaps, the scene functions as a watershed moment for Garland's career as well as a prescient distillation of what would become her trademark gay appeal in the latter half of the twentieth century. What Barbas accurately diagnoses as the "silly schoolgirl" stereotype of early Hollywood film fandom (and one which hasn't quite disappeared) is rooted in a visceral desire to break down the barrier between screen and real life: this is why Betty praises Gable for being "natural" and not an actor when on screen: she imagines he's "just like any fella." Here we find Garland setting forth the very argument that has "structured much of the gay reading" of her star persona, what Richard Dyer sums as her "special relationship to suffering, ordinariness, [and] normality" (138). More importantly, as David Caron notes when discussing Garland's own "dissolution of the boundary between the private and the public, the personal and the non personal" (124), it is the element of shame in Garland's persona that resonates with gay men, the very shame that introduces us to her character before she sings about Clark Gable. The moment of shaming in *The Broadway Melody of 1938* becomes emblematic of the way that particular affect has dictated and structured much of queer and fan sensibilities.

Here we may turn to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who writes that "If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that's because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" (4). David Halperin cites this particular line in his own "Why Gay Shame Now?" piece from the *Gay Shame* edited collection that aimed to unearth the political and cultural value of studying and understanding that

eponymous affect. The Garland scene exists at the intersection of queerness and fandom precisely because it represents a childhood scene of shame that Garland herself would continue to enact and perform throughout her career, a career that in its turn engendered many a childhood scene of shame. Betty openly defies her mother's shaming and channels that decisive moment into one of performance aimed at breaking down the distinction between the larger-than-life Gable she adored on screen and the "just fan of yours" identity she bestows upon herself.

This is precisely what Caron isolates when discussing Garland's later concert shows and her signature moment when she would sit at the edge of the stage to sing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." That moment created an impression of intimacy between herself and the audience, echoing quite explicitly the blurring that Betty dreams of when she coos to Gable's picture that she cried all the way home once when she ran into him because "you looked at me, and you smiled, yeah, you smiled right at me as if you meant it." That moment of individualizing a fan amidst the collective within the framework of a performance is both the motivation of Betty's song and the appeal Garland effortlessly channeled in her live performances. Indeed, the scene in *Broadway Melody* anticipates this very signature move by having Garland sing the latter half of the song to her scrapbook, which is framed as a close-up to-camera shot, locating her audience as both onlookers privy to her late-night longing and stand-ins for the Gable photograph she's singing to. This construction (both in the character of Betty and in the framing of the scene) of an audience who is spoken to directly and who will be a part of a desiring structure is yet another way this scene is emblematic of the figure of the fan, an

aspect which is further highlighted by the way the film, a backstage musical starring Robert Taylor and Eleanor Powell, calls on performance and the theater to structure its own cinematic plot. Despite *Broadway Melody of 1938* being a film, Garland's Betty and her performance of "You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Want To Do It)" depend on the conceit of a performance. While her singing, for example, is diegetic, the accompanying orchestration is not, marking the number (as with various musical numbers on screen then and since) as straddling the line between the recording technology that cinema depends and the live performance it evokes. But Garland's performance of "You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Want To Do It)" is already marked as a re-performance even before one factors in that Garland is lip-syncing to an pre-recorded track (something the still-burgeoning sound-mixing industry of the era had trouble seamlessly editing into the picture). This is because Garland's role for the film was written specifically after a number of executives saw her perform a version of the song at a birthday party thrown by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for Gable himself. It was upon hearing her rendition that executives decided to cast her and add the song to the *Broadway Melody* film, adding some lyrics to make it more explicitly about Gable. This film moment of the Gable song contains the singularity of the live performance. The fan is already someone who sees film as a direct trigger to her emotional life and desires.

Garland's scene, already a re-performance, is rooted in a filmic adoration that is both premised on and quite literally imagines a scenario where fan desire distorts the very boundaries between screen and audience, something her gay fan base would come to find synonymous with her tragic persona. But what we may dub as the queerness of Garland,



both in this early scene of *Broadway Melody* and in her later iteration as a cabaret diva, resides in the interplay between shame and desire, both feelings which structure queer affective relationships. Garland's queer iconicity depends on this very interplay; much like her character in *Broadway Melody*, she always stood for a performer able to voice and enact shameful and seemingly queer desires. Gay men who were drawn to Garland found in her someone who could articulate something about themselves. But, as Halperin notes, this had less to do with a synchronous identification: "Perhaps," he writes, these men

were looking for a way to imaginatively expand their experience, going beyond themselves, escaping from the known world, and realizing their desires without being limited to who they were. That may well have been the whole point of identifying with Judy Garland: she wasn't a gay man, but in certain respects she could express gay desire, what gay men want, *better* than a gay man could. That is, she could actually convey *something even gayer than gay identity itself*. (122-3)

This is evident in her scene from *Broadway Melody*, a small moment that is constructed by her mother (and later by critics like Barbas) as a transgressively coded instance of shameful and ill-directed desire. Betty, in a prim nightgown and girlish ringlets, engages in, as her mother notes, a "crazy" endeavor. Much like loving Donald Duck, pining after Clark Gable is presented as something wholly ridiculous, at once appropriately childish yet normatively chided for its being inappropriate.

If this detour into Judy Garland and its evocation of gay male culture's obsession with the star's life seems circuitous, we can look back at the way Williams's own play brings together the various strands of shame, performance, fandom, and cinema that the

*Broadway Melody of 1938* scene has helped us illuminate. Williams may not have crooned over a Gable picture, but his uninhibited joy in movie watching can help us understand Yacowar's dismissive gesture ("merely a fan"). Sitting together, whispering and laughing at the films on screen, "becoming helpless with glee when a film turns out to be unintentionally funny" (Yacowar 141), Williams' childhood friend Maxwell describes accurately a scenario which leads Yacowar to wish Williams had explored the medium "with a more serious devotion." What I wish to ask, though is what this unserious devotion looks like. How might this unserious devotion help us look at *The Glass Menagerie* (as well as Williams's subsequent drama) in a queerer light? As it turns out, Susan Sontag's description of camp sensibility may offer a tentative answer. In her oft-quoted definition of camp, Sontag refers to that particular sensibility as "failed seriousness." Williams's childish and unserious devotion to the movies places him, in Yacowar's eyes, as "merely a fan," yet — as decades of camp scholarship has shown us — that is a privileged position that can deftly repurpose mainstream culture: it is "a creative impulse in its own right, a strategy for dealing with social domination" (Halperin 203). This is what Halperin dubs a "queer of way of feeling" a term he discusses in terms of the processes through which gay male culture decodes and recodes "the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture, so that they come to function as vehicles of gay or queer meaning" (12). Halperin's *How to be Gay* helpfully sketches a call for approaches to sexuality that hinge on essentialism without undoing or disregarding the work queer theory has produced in the last couple of decades. This is an approach that is well suited to Williams's drama in general and *The Glass Menagerie* in

particular. While Williams was never reticent about his homosexuality, his plays remain vexing in the eyes of post-Stonewall identity-politics rhetoric given their penchant for disowning rigid notions of homosexuality and for staging — as with Tom — characters whose sexuality is ambiguous at best and shamefully closeted at worst. For Halperin, gayness is “a mode of perception, an attitude” (13): “*homosexuality* itself, even as an erotic orientation, even as a specifically sexual subjectivity, consists in a dissident way of feeling and relating to the world” (13). This dissident way of relating to the world proceeds from the way queer subjects are confronted with a mass culture that stereotypes or outright ignores their existence, and more importantly, their desires. Thus, to intervene in such cultural productions, queer subjects take on an attitude that distorts, reframes and repurposes said culture. It is in that spirit that I want to repurpose Garland’s scene in *Broadway Melody* by understanding it — given its connection to shame, to transgressive notions of desire, and to the necessary invocations of performance and audience engagement — as epitomizing the figure of the queer fan that is embodied by Williams’s Tom Wingfield.

Williams did not just love films, he wanted to be a part of them.<sup>11</sup> In wanting to “climb into the screen and join the action,” Williams was asserting his desire to be a fan, in the broadest sense of the word: to become “actively involved” in the entertainment presented to him by cinema and refuse to “accept mass culture passively” (Barbas 4), not here with fan mail, as Garland’s *Broadway Melody* schoolgirl, but with Betty’s same desire to break down the very division between what’s on screen (“real actors”) and the audience (“just like any fella”). What is revealing about Williams’s statement is that it

figures this fan relationship topographically in a way that acknowledges and depends on the very materiality of cinema as a medium, as something projected on a screen. Thus, Williams's desire to climb into the screen — creating as it does a topography wherein he is, quite literally, below — highlights the subordinated position he embodies as a fan; it goes beyond the mere identification that psychoanalytic inflected writings on film spectatorship privilege. By wanting to cross into the screen, Williams does away with a need to identify with a character (or even the camera) on screen and instead tells us he wants to belong to the medium of cinema. The screen here functions not as a mirror but as a window into another medium. If, as Stanley Cavell has noted, the “screen is a barrier” that “screens me from the world it holds — that is, makes me invisible” (24), Williams, in this formulation, wished to make himself visible and an active participant within the world that the screen holds. Williams not only repurposes mass culture imaginatively (as Halperin would put it), he yearns for a relationship between the live performance of theater and film's extravagant seductions, or rather he sees in the latter the possibility of renovating the former by imagining a permeable division between screen and fan. Here we might recall Roland Barthes's discussion of “Éros et le théâtre” in his autobiographical *Barthes par Barthes* which draws in cinema to make a crucial distinction between live performance and those images on screen:

The body in the theater is at once contingent and essential, you cannot possess it (it is magnified by the prestige of nostalgic desire): contingent, you might, for you would merely need to be momentarily crazy (which is within your power) in order to jump onto the stage and touch what you desire. The cinema, on the contrary, excludes by a fatality of Nature all transition to the act: here the image is the *irremediable* absence of the represented body.

(The cinema would be like those bodies which pass by, in summer, with shirts unbuttoned to the waist. *Look but don't touch*, say these bodies and the cinema, both of them, literally, *factitious*.) (83-84)

Williams's anecdote speaks directly to the issues Barthes addresses here, though that nostalgic desire, tinged with a momentary craze impels Williams to refigure the screen *as* a stage, one which would beckon him to go up and touch those bodies which pass by in the summer. Indeed, Barthes's metaphor, suffused with homoerotic desire, is what Williams's queer fandom tries to harness. Queer fandom, driven as it is by a dissident relation to those figures on screen, is submission to the Hollywood set-up but also a critical subversive pose; it is Garland calling out Gable's singularity because of his own ordinariness, Garland's own appeal given her failed normalcy, and Williams's appropriation of moviegoing as an apt theatrical metaphor with which to explore homosexuality in *The Glass Menagerie*.

What Williams presents us in Tom is a child not content with the identification that cinema offered him, but one who saw in the very *form* of cinema an escape from his life. This becomes the central conceit in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. What Williams offers us in Tom's "memory play" is a conflation of the open secret that is Tom's sexuality with his own orientation towards cinema. In this sense, Fiske's formulation and Barbas's understanding of fandom seem to have more in common with the queer cultural work that Halperin analyzes in his work by looking at what he refers to as the "sexual politics of form." In many ways, this is exactly what David Savran has attempted in his discussions of Williams's dramaturgy. For Savran, the theater is a site of queerness itself:

the queer character of theater depends on more than its historical associations with lesbians and gay men as producers and consumers. It can also be seen, I will argue, as an effect of theater's ontology. In comparison with other arts (especially film), theater is queer in part because of its particular mode of address and its uncanny ability to arouse a spectator's mutable and mutating investments. (*Queer Sort of Materialism* 60)

While I don't disagree with Savran on this account of theater's queerness, I think it's telling that he singles out film as an exemplary counterpart, especially because it is in a movie theater where he finds the very queerness of Williams's drama. In his study of Williams's plays, Savran turns to an early short story, "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio." This story, as its narrator helpfully informs us, takes place in a "third-rate cinema which specialized in the showing of cowboy pictures and other films of the sort that have a special appeal to children and male adolescents," (7) in particular the protagonist of Williams's tale, Pablo Gonzalez whom we meet after he's lost his older partner Emil Kroger to cancer, and looks for the fleeting pleasures of the Joy Rio. For Savran, the scene at the Joy Rio movie theater "provides an astonishingly apt and prescient metaphor for Tennessee Williams's project as a playwright: recolonizing an old-fashioned theater and turning it into an enigmatic, if slightly queer, site of resistance" (77). As Savran explains it, "Williams's theater comprises a double spectacle, one (the "heterosexual") occurring on a bright screen, while the other (the "homosexual," the more vibrantly productive of the two) takes place in the gloomy, subtextual, private galleries, onto which the glare from the cowboy pictures and other sensational and sentimental narratives is reflected" (78). What Savran doesn't quite account for is the presence of those "bright screens" or the way in which shame so crucially structures Williams's own treatment of the sexual escapades at the Joy Rio. Not only does Kroger leave his lover Gonzales his

estate but “the full gift of his shame” which his younger lover now carries with him when he does “the sad, lonely things that Mr. Kroger had done for such a long time before his one lasting love came to him. Mr. Kroger had even practiced those things in the same place in which they were practiced now by Mr. Gonzales, in the many mysterious recesses of the Joy Rio” (8). Those “mysterious recesses” of the Joy Rio are necessarily associated with the shame Mr. Kroger experienced and bequeathed to his younger lover, a shame which Amanda will continually index in *The Glass Menagerie* whenever she voices her dismay at hearing that Tom is “going to the movies” (“I think you’ve been doing things that you’re ashamed of” [23] she tells him at one point). While I agree that the Joy Rio is a “prescient and apt metaphor” for Williams’s drama, I think we must pay closer attention to the fact that this metaphor requires cinema itself, if only as a structure under which Williams’s drama can take place, especially one which nurtures and depends on shame-riddled scenes of sexual activity. Thus, this “slightly queer site of resistance” depends on the very action of going to the movies; film is not so much a necessary foil for theater’s queerness in Williams as much as a necessary complement to it.

Tom’s obsession with moviegoing in *The Glass Menagerie* is used to code the protagonist’s sexuality but it also formally structures the play. The “recolonized” theater in Savran’s turn of phrase turns out to be not just indicative of how Williams suffuses his drama with these double spectacles at the level of content, but also imbues a “derelict” theater with the very form of cinema and filmgoing. *The Glass Menagerie* is a play about “climbing into the screen”: Tom and his memory play are an embodiment of this desire to escape into the movies even as they showcase that escape in a purely theatrical setting.

Williams *needs* the theater: it is no surprise that the Joy Rio is an old theater-turned-cinema. But Savran's metaphor is helpful in that it brings together the very physical confines of a theater, moviegoing and same-sex desire. *The Glass Menagerie* brings these three elements together, combining them not only in the movie fan character of Tom, but in the way the play's formal elements (staging, setting, lighting) are irrevocably tied to him, who claims to give us "truth in the guise of illusion" — what Williams would come to call his "plastic theater." With *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams depends on "theater's ontology" (and, as Savran notes, its "mode of address" and the way it arouses spectator's mutable investments) even as he frames it through the prism of cinema itself. Williams wants the spectator to "read" homosexuality through Tom's presence on stage—a presence that the play itself queers. On Williams's stage, cinema indexes and represents but also *houses* homosexuality.

This is made explicit in the opening scene of the play when Williams stages his own desire of "climbing into the screen." "At the rise of the curtain," Williams instructs,

the audience is faced with the dark grim rear wall of the Wingfield tenement. This building is flanked on both sides by dark, narrow alleys which run into murky canyons of tangled clotheslines, garbage cans, and the sinister latticework of neighboring fire escapes. It is up and down these side alleys that exterior entrances and exits are made during the play. At the end of Tom's opening commentary, the dark tenement wall slowly becomes transparent and reveals the interior of the ground floor of the Wingfield apartment. (3)

To achieve this, Mielziner developed a set of scrims that created a sense of depth on the stage. Scrims allow stage directors and lighting designers the ability to compartmentalize the stage and create the "dark grim rear wall" that could be made transparent as Williams



calls for. Made of an open-weave fabric, scrims appear opaque when lit correctly from the front but look transparent when the front light is turned off, and objects behind them are lit. Commenting on the effect of the scrims Mary Henderson has argued that it made the Wingfield apartment look like a “transparent fourth wall” (Henderson qtd. in White 106) outside of which Tom begins the play. Yet, seeing as Tom sets the play in motion by addressing the audience, the “fourth wall” that obscures the Wingfield apartment functions less as a theatrical “fourth wall” — which would recall Ibsenite realism — and more as a screen. The “scene is memory” Williams notes, but Tom’s initial monologue makes it clear that he is “the opposite of a stage magician” telling us that he gives us “truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (4). That this illusion is tied to cinema becomes particularly striking when looking at the sketches Mielziner prepared for that original production. As the sketches show, this “dark grim rear wall” resembles a screen, one which Tom is able to climb into. In fact, the audience is supposed to hear and see the opening scene in the dining room through “the transparent fourth wall of the building and the transparent gauze portieres of the dining-room arch” (3) before this “fourth wall slowly ascends out of sight” (4). This first scene is presented to us framed, quite literally, in a screen. Tom is not merely returning to the scene of memory, but presents and understands it as a screen for the audience. Just as he goes to the movies every night, Tom stages a moment in American theater where cinema becomes a formal trope and an aesthetic structure of the stage. Here is Williams — aided by Mielziner’s transparent scrims — breaking down the very distinction between cinema and audiences that his early childhood anecdote pointed to.

This impetus to “climb into the screen” that Tom literalizes gets re-inscribed in the play by Williams’s use of screen titles throughout the action. In his own words, these screen titles were designed to “accent certain values in each scene” (xx). They were to be projected against the back of the stage, blending in with the rest of the scenery of the Wingfield apartment. Williams mostly understood this device to have an architectural value. As George Brandt notes, “The screens — which, it is to be noted, are to carry images as well as legends — bear a striking resemblance to, and were quite probably inspired by, silent film titles” (127). What Brandt does not explore is the fact that in theatrical performances these titles cannot function exactly as they do in film. In silent cinema, screen titles appeared in *between* frames, usually filling in gaps for spectators who during the early years of silent cinema had to be trained to read the grammar of cinema. When silent cinema began and “when every shot was to some extent self-sufficient, films often used a title to announce each change of shot. When the time came that the producers began to consider a group of shots more closely related, they found that one main title could be used to label the group.” These “leader shots” “announced what the scene was going to be before it started” (Bowser 139) much like the signs at variety and vaudeville shows. The main function of inter-titles was “to ‘break’ scenes, like a sort of drop curtain, so you can get people on and off stage for the next scene or shift scenery” (Bowser 142). What then is the effect of using filmic titles on stage? As Sontag argues, “Theatre is confined to a logical or *continuous* use of space. Cinema (through editing, that is through the change of shot — which is the basic unit of film construction) has access to an alogical or *discontinuous* use of space” (29). That is, in

film every change of shot offers us a change of point of view and a change of space — or at least, of spatial orientation. The inter-titles disrupt space altogether by existing against a black backdrop. Because film can only sustain one point of view at a time (the strength and the limitation of the camera, which even as it surveys maintains one focus)<sup>12</sup> the audience is trusted to make connections *across shots*: the inter-titles function as suturing devices. In theater, especially with screen titles that aim to “be indistinguishable from the rest [of the set walls] when not in use” (xx), Williams is picking up a technique that enforces what Sontag refers to as film’s discontinuous use of space and placed it on the stage where it becomes part of the continuous use of space that the theater offers.

For Williams and his audience, these screen titles (and images) are not placed in between scenes or moments but instead push audiences to focus on the action of the play and the screen-titles concurrently. In this sense, while “bearing a striking resemblance” to screen film titles, the effect of Williams’s screen titles function differently when put in the background of scenes. Williams suggests in his production notes, that these screen images and titles “will strengthen the effect of what is merely allusion in the writing and allow the primary point to be made more simply and lightly than if the entire responsibility were on the spoken lines” (xx). Williams understood the screens as having an architectural value, punctuating the actions and emotions of the play. Relying as they would have on Mielziner’s transparent scrims, these screen titles encourage audience members to think of *The Glass Menagerie* as a play that echoes cinema but one which nevertheless appropriates those cinematographic elements into the very structure of the stage. Williams thus imagined for his audience an experience of his play that placed them

in the role of movie spectators, using their own experiences *as* movie spectators to understand the purpose and role of the screen titles.

This may explain why directors have tended to discard these screens in productions. Without these screen titles, the play lends itself easily to a realistic *mise-en-scène* and this was the way the original Broadway production was staged with only Mielziner's scrimms and lighting design veering away from the realism that Williams eschewed in his own published script. This is why Williams goes to such lengths in his production notes to specify what the original conception of the play was, because it was not what ended up being staged in the Playhouse theater the spring of 1945. In this sense, *The Glass Menagerie* has lived a double life ever since its opening, epitomized by the existence of two starkly different editions: a "Reading Edition" and an "Acting Edition." The latter, of course, excises the very features I am focusing on, especially the screen titles which were not used on stage until the 1983 Broadway revival production with Jessica Tandy as Amanda and Amanda Plummer as Laura. Even the most recent production (mounted in 2013 with Cherry Jones as Amanda and Zachary Quinto as Tom) had director John Tiffany restore many of the modernist techniques of the published play to the staging (and adding a few of his own<sup>13</sup>) only to discard the titles altogether. Audiences have been routinely presented with a version of Williams's drama that strips the play of what Tony Kushner has dubbed the "jarring bits of mid-century modernist theatrical experimentation" which "damage the Chekovian unity of color and mood Tennessee aspired to" (45). It is no surprise then to find that literary and theater critics

who want to reclaim for Williams a modernist (even expressionist) ethos point to the use of screen titles even as theater practitioners tend to reject them in productions.

Williams wants the screen titles to inform and comment on the action of the drama on stage yet instead of merely leading the action, the titles/images can only complement it. If, as Geoffrey Borny argues in looking at both editions of Williams's text, "any downplaying in production of the elements in [*The Glass Menagerie*] results in a trivialization of the play" (102), mining their effect in a hypothetical audience will no doubt offer productive readings. In the opening scene of the play, for example, Williams intended for these screen legends to provide context for the character of Amanda. As Tom finishes his introductory monologue, "Amanda's voice becomes audible through the portieres," and Williams places a legend on one of the screens that reads "Ou [sic] sont les neiges" (6). The line, which he provides in full only minutes later ("Ou [sic] sont les neiges d'antan?" [9]), comes from François Villon's "Ballade des dames du temps jadis" (1461-1462), a poem that deals, as the title suggests, with ladies of times past. The line in question, as translated by Dante Gabrielle Rosetti, reads as "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" Thus, before we even get any dialogue from Amanda, Williams's screen legend offers us crucial information about her, even as it couches it in a campy melodramatic splendor (in French no less). Through this reference, Williams aligns Amanda with Villon's ladies of times past which include Echo, Joan of Arc and several French monarchs, all icons of "yesteryear." As audience members though, this "leader shot" screen legend doesn't entirely precede Amanda's introduction as it actually becomes contemporaneous with it. What it does, then, is to underline the characteristics

that become all too apparent once the dining room scene that opens the play begins.

Amanda spends the first moments of the play berating her son Tom for his manners at the table (“We can’t say grace until you come to the table” [6], “You’re not excused from the table” [7]). Amanda, as we learn, is an old-fashioned matriarch, stuck, as she then reminds us, in the world of her past, when “One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain” she received seventeen gentleman callers. This prompts the next image on the screen:

“Amanda as a girl on the porch, greeting callers” (8). Much like the earlier screen legend, this image, offers us a clearer vision of what Amanda is saying. While Tom — arguably the character most in control of the tone of the play — scoffs and openly taunts his mother (“I bet you could talk” [8] he goads her), the screen image works to validate Amanda’s memories. The very first time we hear Amanda talking about her seventeen gentleman callers — a scene Tom plays “as though reading from a script” (8), suggesting his indifference and the meta-theatrical distance he enjoys as narrator/character — Williams offers us an image of “Amanda as a girl on a porch, greeting gentlemen callers” on the screen. Here is a moment where the inclusion of the screen image immediately refashions the scene. Following Tom’s cues, the dialogue and interplay between him and his mother, intends the audience to — even if ever so briefly — see the delusion that so motivates Amanda in her later years. What the image of Amanda as a girl on the porch accomplishes, is to disrupt the focus on Tom which the staging suggests, opening up the play away from just his memories and perspective and offers us a glimpse into Amanda’s own memories, validating her storied past, giving depth to her recollections. In other ways, these screen titles also work to extend our knowledge of the characters on stage

beyond their on-stage presence and scripted dialogue; images of Amanda as a girl as well as titles that allude to her affinity with Villon's "dames du temps jadis" encourages us to imagine stage and screen functioning concurrently but also to imbue these characters as having a past construed outside the confines of their staged present, whether we see these images as Amanda's screened past or her imagined dreams. This move deepens the way in which Williams's theatre audience is encouraged to use their moviegoing habits to underscore and understand their interaction with *The Glass Menagerie*. Just as Garland's Betty is able to imagine a fantasy wherein she understands and knows Clark Gable outside his screened performances, Williams's audience is offered meta-theatrical insights into Amanda, Tom, and Laura that broaden our understanding of these figures.

Thus, the early given insight of Amanda's association with a bygone era is made visually explicit later in the play. Her two scenes at the telephone where she is calling fellow Daughters of the American Revolution members to sell them subscriptions of *Companion* magazine are the only ones solely focusing on one character outside of Tom's monologues in the present.<sup>14</sup> In them, Williams shows us a woman tied to what is coded in the play as an antiquated genre: the serial. While Tom is obsessed with movies ("You go to the movies *entirely* too *much!*" Amanda berates him [33]), Amanda is connected to the serials in *Companion* magazine. These phone conversations present Amanda as a garrulous woman physically isolated from the stage around her, but also from the women she's calling. Late in the first scene of the play, Williams calls for a "shaft of very clear light" to be "thrown on her face against the *faded tapestry* of the curtains" (10, emphasis added). In one key moment when again, at the table she and her son are not speaking to

one another over a row the night before, Williams asks for a “cruelly sharp” light to show the “aged but childish features” of her face — “satirical as a Daumier print” (29). The reference to Daumier — both a renowned cartoonist but also a pioneer of realism in painting — points to the way Williams’s drama skirts both when dealing with Amanda: a character who seems so real because of her exuberance, but no less ridiculous because of it. Amanda’s “girlish ringlets” are mentioned yet again in stage directions when she is suddenly rejuvenated in spirit given the company of one of Tom’s co-workers. The dinner that follows finds Amanda wearing one of her dresses from her youth as well as the aforementioned “girlish ringlets.” Amanda’s “girlish Southern vivacity” (62) which shocks and embarrasses Tom is further emphasized by another image on screen. While the screen projects the image of “Amanda as a girl” (63), Williams stages a lengthy speech wherein Amanda tries to make Jim welcome. As Laura cowers in the kitchen, Tom and Jim settle down in the living room before supper while Amanda tells them how she thinks “light things are better fo” this time of year. The same as light clothes are” elaborating that “Light clothes an’ light food are what warm weather calls fo” — including the “light dress — terribly old!” which she pulled out of her trunk (63). Amanda’s girlishness is tied to her character being lit in ways that present her as a caricature of the past she so tragically inhabits but also to the very lightness in demeanor and wardrobe she embodies.

As these examples of Amanda’s short scenes suggest, *The Glass Menagerie*, in its original production as it is preserved by the published script, punctuates the drama of the Wingfields in order to bring out the ways Williams’s drama mobilizes cinema through its



use of light. From his production notes Williams makes it clear that he wants *The Glass Menagerie* to use lighting to heighten the non-realistic aspects of the play. To accomplish this he states that “the stage is dim” and that “shafts of light are focused on selected areas or actors, sometimes in contradistinction to what is the apparent center” (xxi). This very call to focus light on things “in contradistinction to what is the apparent center” calls to mind a way of disrupting the naturalistic staging which the play has been accorded, heightening as it does what Anne Fleche has described as Williams’s “editorial technique” (68) and encouraging a queer relationship between the “apparent center” and the actors and areas in focus, what Halperin may dub a “dissident” way of relating to what we are presented with on stage. Light helps establish the very rigid structure of the relationships in the play. Amanda gets singled out on stage by being the character who is called to be spot-lit; Tom, who so enjoys movie theaters, is shrouded in darkness; while Laura, whose weakness anchors the play’s tragic ending, is associated with candle light.<sup>15</sup>

In constantly offering Amanda a spotlight, both play and playwright (embodied in Tom), mark Amanda’s connection to the very theatricality of the stage. In the first scene of the play, when Tom begins to stage the memories of his life in the apartment with his mother and sister, we witness a dinner scene wherein the tension between Tom and his mother is played “as though reading from a script” (8). Crucially, when Amanda begins to reminisce about her Sunday afternoons in Blue Mountain, “Tom motions for music and a spot light on Amanda.” Immediately, “her eyes lift, her face glows, her voice becomes rich and elegiac” (9). This small gesture is confirmation that Tom wants us to understand the seductive power of his mother’s stories while clearly calling out their hyperbolic

language. What this initial exchange presents is a mother-son relationship that, as the character list suggests, defines these two characters: Amanda is “the mother” while Tom is “her son.” But their mother-son relationship is, even at this early stage in the play, presented as a vexed one. Amanda dotes on Tom even as he rebuffs her. Yet even as he is openly disrespectful of his mother during the scene, Tom’s pocket tricks — those that present that truth in the guise of illusion — show him to be much warmer to Amanda from his vantage point in the present: The Tom in the scene seems annoyed at having to listen yet again to Amanda’s stories of her “seventeen gentlemen callers”: “I know what’s coming!” he whines (7). Meanwhile, the Tom who functions as a stage manager spot lights her, an overly disruptive moment which nevertheless presents Amanda’s role in the play as necessary but subservient to Tom’s presentation.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda and Tom play out the most common of gay family dynamics, especially as Tom’s artistic sensibility (and moviegoing) sensibility is laced with a degree of scorn for the labor-intensive and oppressive familial world of the tenement apartment he shares with Amanda and Laura. D.A. Miller’s *Place for Us* and Halperin’s *How to be Gay*, two recent studies of gay men’s engagement with popular culture (Broadway in the former, cinema in the latter) structure their discussions around two texts that present an almost archetypal (and culturally recognizable) vision of a gay son and his smothering mother: the 1959 Arthur Laurents, Jule Styne and Stephen Sondheim musical *Gypsy* based on the life of Gypsy Rose Lee, the famous striptease artist and her monster of a mother, Rose, and the 1945 Michael Curtiz film *Mildred Pierce* based on the James M. Cain novel of the same name. These larger-than-life

mothers are central not only to these texts but to the larger gay cultural imagination. This is in no small part due to Ethel Merman and Joan Crawford, whose performances as Rose and Mildred — as Miller and Halperin point out — have endeared them to gay men for decades. At the heart of *Gypsy* and *Mildred Pierce* is the antagonistic relationship between an overbearing mother and a figural queer child. Miller theorizes the figure of the “Star Mother” in *Gypsy*, and its purchase on gay male subjectivity. “Should *Gypsy* ever be judged to deserve its self-allegorizing subtitle as ‘a musical fable,’” Miller notes, “we would at last understand that the Broadway musical is the unique genre of mass culture to be elaborated in the name of the mother: a name, however, that it dare not quite speak — ‘m-m-momma m-m-momma’ indeed — except now and then, on the well-known principle of any closet, to curse it” (83). Fascinated as he is with the way in which this musical allegorizes the gay boy/monster mom dynamics that so structure much of gay male self-fashioned histories, Miller points out that the very form of the Broadway musical depends on a gay sensibility premised on its very exclusion in the name of, and because of, the figure of the mother; a figure one cannot help but curse and admire at the same time. Rose, the true star of *Gypsy* achieves this very feat by overshadowing and casting aside the gay boy stand-in that is Louise in Miller’s reading. Read as an allegorical gay family romance, the fraught relationship between Louise and her mother, much like Veda and Mildred emerges as one framed in terms of fleeing the mother’s domain into the space of the stage. Halperin, focusing on the “gay boy” figure that gets mapped against these monster mothers, points out that in *Veda Pierce* we see the type of social and cultural alienation that afflicts many young gay men. In the middle of the

Great Depression and following a divorce, Crawford's Pierce works against the odds to raise her daughter, working first as a waitress, later opening her own restaurant while her daughter, a gifted pianist and a social climber, resents their low social standing. As Halperin notes when discussing not only *Mildred Pierce*, but also *Mommie Dearest* and Willa Cather's "Paul's Case," "a feeling of superiority to boring, normal people has long been a noted (celebrated or abominated) feature of gay male subjectivity. It reflects the elitist, aristocratic tendency in gay male culture, also evident in gay male cult of beauty and aesthetics" (226). Tom, like Veda Pierce and Paul himself, wishes to extricate himself from the celotex interior of the warehouse where he works and the candle-lit yellow-tinted world of the apartment where he lives. He rushes to the cinema at nights, indulging in a modern (and decidedly affordable) vision of beauty and aesthetics. Indeed, Halperin's own discussion arrives at a similar place when his discussion of this "gay family romance" leads him to the work of Manuel Puig which focuses on the very figure of the queer film fan. This fandom, which Amanda censures and finds so threatening is caught up in issues of shame, performance, and (homo)sexuality.

Williams frames Tom's decision to flee his family (nightly and eventually for good at the end of the play) in terms of escaping to and because of the films he watches. In one of his key speeches in the play, Tom expresses his restlessness in relation to the movies he routinely spends his night watching. He complains, "People go to the movies instead of moving!... Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everyone in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them have them!" (61). He yearns for a time where people will come out of the "dark room" to

have some adventures themselves. As he tells Jim, “I’m tired of the *movies* and I am *about to move!*” (61). Tom’s language, focused as it is on the “dark” room and the adventures he sees onscreen is underscored by the very light that Williams’s stage directions call for. Before he begins this speech the “incandescent marquees and signs of the first-run movie houses light his face from across the alley” making him “look like a voyager” (60-61), a reference that is equal parts Bette Davis and Walt Whitman (“Now, Voyager, sail thou forth, to seek and find”). Literally then, it is the light and promise of movies which make a voyager out of Tom Wingfield, forcing him to turn those late-night moviegoing habits into a movie-like adventure; a wish Williams cannot help but ironize by having his autobiographical alter-ego remain forever trapped in replaying (in ways both theatrical and cinematic) the very memories of the life he fled. Tom doesn’t merely want to escape *to* the movies, but he acknowledges that it is the very space *of* the movies which compels him to “move” out of the spotlight world of his mother (the world of the stage) and into the world recorded, projected, and screened by the movies.

Amanda — like *Gypsy*’s Rose — is constantly drawing attention to herself and finds herself irrevocably tied to the very form of the theater. What she fails to do in the play itself — drown out Laura and Tom’s failed presents with tales of her own past exceptionality — is what critics have accorded Amanda ever since Laurette Taylor played her in the original Chicago tryout and subsequent Broadway transfer of the play. As the aging mother of two who waxes nostalgically on about her youth in the South and who cannot understand her frail daughter and wayward son, Taylor’s performance was at the center of early reviews. Lewis Nichols, reviewing the play for the *New York Times* stated

that Taylor's performance was "completely perfect" making Williams's "many good passages sing." Nichols' review pits Taylor's performance against Williams's play as a whole, re-establishing the tension at the heart of the Wingfield family. Tom, whose "memory play" we witness, is in charge of his mother and sister's welfare after being abandoned by their father. This leads to endless confrontations between the would-be poet stuck at a warehouse job to pay the bills, and his mother who wants more for her daughter than the sheltered life among her menagerie of glass animals she prefers. But if the play begins and ends with Tom, Taylor's performance quickly cemented Amanda as the center of Williams's first success as a playwright. As Thomas P. Adler notes, "Taylor's uncannily truthful and incandescent performance as Amanda in the original Broadway production of *The Glass Menagerie* made it seem as if it were her play" suggesting that the choice of actresses who have since played "The Mother"<sup>16</sup> — including Katharine Hepburn, Jessica Tandy and Julie Harris — "have solidified that impression for audiences and reviewers of the play on stage and screen, and to some extent, even for academic critics" (37). More bluntly and in line with many Williams scholars,<sup>17</sup> Harold Bloom argued in his 1988 introduction to the play that "Amanda is at the center" of the play (5), yet as we have noted, it is Williams's insistence on focusing on what is "in contradistinction to the apparent center" that one finds how he bridges together Tom's sexuality and his interest in continually going to the movies.

If Amanda is spot-lighted, demanding the full attention of her son and daughter as well as the audience, Tom is associated instead with the darkened spaces reminiscent of the movie theaters he frequents. When we first see him he is lighting a cigarette on the

dimly-lit stage. Throughout the play, Tom is either encroached by darkness or lit obliquely (by a setting sun [38], by movie theater marquee lights [60], by the moon [96]). The play itself thematizes Tom's desire to remain shrouded in darkness. Williams presents his audience with a clear connection between Tom's preference for the darkened movie theaters and his coded homosexuality, both of which are pit against the stark light of daily life. After one of Amanda's spot-lit monologues by the phone, the scene quickly "dims out" and cuts to a scene where we find Amanda and Tom mid-argument. Amid the "turgid smoking red glow" (21) of the living room, Amanda blasts Tom for his movie-going habits: "I think you've been doing things that you're ashamed of. That's why you act like this. I don't believe you go every night to the movies. Nobody goes to the movies night after night. Nobody in their right minds goes to the movies as often as you pretend to" (23). It is here that Williams begins to suggest that Tom's moviegoing habits are — if not mutually exclusive as Amanda believes — then intricately tied to things Tom may be ashamed of, namely, his homosexual encounters.

Instead of directly addressing Amanda's accusations, Tom invokes the language of lighting to explain why he spends so many nights at the movies. "You think I want to spend fifty-five *years* down there in that — *celotex interior!* with — *fluorescent — tubes!*" he yells at Amanda, "Look! I'd rather somebody pick up a crowbar and battered out my brains — than go back mornings!" (23). Williams threads this very desire for darkness into the plot and staging of the play, which is why it is not surprising that in talking about *The Glass Menagerie*, David Savran argues that Williams "reveals the secrets of Amanda, Laura, and Jim, while leaving Tom's nocturnal activities

conspicuously in the dark” (91). It is in Savran’s turn of phrase, pointing to a veiled reveal, that we can see the ways in which looking into lighting in *The Glass Menagerie* allows us to expand and explore the queer undertones of Tom even as they are intricately woven into the language of moviegoing. When he tries to exit this argument by saying he’s going to the movies, Amanda again retorts that she will not believe “that lie” (24). For Amanda, “going to the movies” is Tom’s shorthand for his life of vice, which leads Tom to taunt her with stories of the sordid things he does when he goes wandering at night, invoking a cinematic underground for his mother:

TOM: I’m going to opium dens! Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminal hangouts, Mother I’ve join the Hogan Gang, I’m a hired assassin, I carry a tommy gun in a violin case! I run a string of cat houses in the Valley! They call me Killer, Killer Wingfield, I’m leading a double life, a simple, honest worker by day, by night a dynamic *czar* of the *underworld*, *Mother*: I go to gambling casinos, I spin away fortunes on the roulette table! I wear a patch over one eye and a false mustache, sometimes I put on green whiskers. On those occasions they call me - *El Diablo!* Oh, I could tell you so many things to make you sleepless! My enemies plan to dynamite this space. They’re going to blow us all sky-high some night. I’ll be glad, very happy, and so will you! You’ll go up, up on a broomstick, over Blue Mountain with seventeen gentleman callers! You ugly — babbling old — *witch!* (24)

Williams’s choice of lighting for this scene (a “clear pool of light” for Amanda while a “turgid smoky red glow” lights the dining room, casting shadows on the ceiling “by the fiery glow” [22]) stresses Tom’s larger-than-life tales which echo the large figures on flickering screens to which he flees at the end of the scene but also the red-light district Amanda imagines Tom frequents. In a way, Amanda’s fears construct in the audience an image not unlike the one Williams explored in his Joy Rio story. Yet, what is striking about these images is how steeped they are in the iconography of gang movies of the



1930s, riddled with clichés that would be easily recognizable for audiences and Amanda alike. From the “tommy gun in a violin case” to his eye-patch and “false mustache” and his “green whiskers,” Tom’s hyperbolic monologue evokes the seedy underground of films such as *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932) only to end with an image that, consciously or not, conjures up the wicked witch of the West from the 1939 picture *The Wizard of Oz*. For the knowing audience of the 1940s (and more forcefully for audiences today who have seen the esteem for Dorothy’s Technicolor journey rise since its disappointing box-office in 1939), this reference works to impress upon us the view of cinema as an escape for Tom. Even if Judy Garland’s Dorothy has not yet become for Tom (or his contemporary audience) a symbol for male gay culture, aligning his mother with the cackling “babbling old witch” shows us that Amanda is indeed a figure he wishes he could banish (or flee from) in order to find himself free to be who he wants to be. On a more immediate scale, Tom’s words work to torment Amanda, feeding into her paranoia even as their mocking tone undermines her accusations. What he does accomplish is to continue to tie together his movie-going outings with images of vice and criminality, if only by importing those very images from cinema itself.

The following scene opens with Tom stumbling drunk onto the fire escape landing. As he fishes in his pockets for his door key, he removes “a motley assortment of articles in the search, including a shower of movie ticket stubs” (26). What seems like a small gesture on Williams part, speaks back to Amanda’s fear that Tom is engaging in activities *other* than going to the movies. Indeed, the imagery Williams invokes here (that “shower”) bridges together the sexualized image of moviegoing Tom’s mother with the

seemingly mundane activity of going to the movies. This short scene shows us that Amanda's fear, as well as the critical conversation that has grown to understand Tom's moviegoing habits as *merely* coding his homosexuality, is altogether unfounded. Clearly intoxicated from his stint at the movies (in ways figural and literal), a disheveled Tom wakes up his sister as he fumbles at the door. When asked by Laura where he's been he proudly states that he had been to the movies and that he had to stay through the entire program ("There was a Garbo picture and a Mickey Mouse and a travelogue and a newsreel and a preview of coming attractions" [26]). The level of detail confirms that while the cinema may indeed harbor activities Tom may be "too ashamed of," he is indeed seduced by the nightly programs at the movie theater. Of more interest to us is the stage-headliner of this "very long program," Malvolio the Magician who not only gives Tom plenty of alcohol during his performance, but also furnishes him with a "shimmering rainbow-colored scarf" (27), a gift whose coded significance is potentially more legible for contemporary audiences than it would have been for Williams's contemporaries. "But the wonderfulest trick of all," Tom tells Laura "was the coffin trick. We nailed him to a coffin and he got out of the coffin without removing one nail... There is a trick that would come in handy for me — get me out of this two-by-four situation!" (27). This throwaway scene, which mostly sets up the combative breakfast that follows the next morning between Tom and his mother, is worth pausing on because it is the most explicit moment where Williams presents Tom as actually engaging in the very actions his mother and daughter (not to mention certain critics) believe to be code for something else. Amanda's vision of Tom's life of vice and crime is not mutually exclusive with Tom's

actual enjoyment of movies themselves, or at the very least, with what moviegoing allows him to experience.

What's striking about this scene is the way it weaves together the various discourses we found in the queer fandom scene found in *Broadway Melody of 1938*. Here is a moment where Williams brings together performance, cinema and queer desire. Indeed, while the scene may suggest Tom escapes to the movies, it is Malvolio the escape artist (and stage master of the cinema revue he attends) who represents both what Tom aspires to do ("There is a trick that would come in handy for me") as well as what he accomplishes on stage (giving us the "truth in the guise of illusion"). For Tom, as for Williams, the space of cinema is inextricably linked to the world of the theater and performance. Just as Judy Garland's performance of "You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Want To Do It)" depended on the necessary relationship between live performance and film, so here does Tom show us that the division between cinema and performance is a permeable one. He escapes into the space of cinema but the play reformulates this (as the Joy Rio before it) as a space that is necessarily dependent on the space of performance. Tom's "I'm going to the *movies!*" becomes a refrain for his vision of escape from his life in St Louis. To escape meant to go *to* the movies, and later, to want to be *in* them — to live a cinematic adventure. It is not escapism (which Tom detests) and not quite an escape (though that is indeed what he does at the end of the play). Instead, he cherishes the space of the cinema and the activity of moviegoing. He cherishes being a queer movie fan, one who's engaged but looks askew, who yearns to be enveloped by the screen while wholly

able to position himself outside the frame; indeed located outside of it because of his dissident relationship to the figures and relationships there represented.

Tom embodies, for Williams, a way to view and structure the world. Much like a boy wanting to replay a favorite (or, in this case, painful) movie in his head, Tom offers up his last few days in his apartment in St Louis as an entrance into a screen even as he *stages* it. This is why Tom is a helpful point of entrance into a queer way of looking embedded in both plot and form of Williams's play. It is Tom who infects the play with cinema's techniques (the screens, the "cinematic flow" of scenes rather than acts) and who, in his role as narrator and "illusionist," marks this "memory play" as being part of Williams's "plastic theater" endeavor. It is no surprise that, at the climax of the play, after Jim reveals he is already engaged and leaves, Tom nonchalantly exclaims "I'm going to the movies" (95). This comes right after Amanda calls her son out for not knowing about Jim's engagement and telling him that "You don't know things anywhere! You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions!" (95) vocalizing what Williams's play has been predicated on. Tom's moviegoing habits in the play seem at first sight to signify something *else* — in essence, the late nights he spends at the movie theatre become ways of coding his homosexuality — yet at this point, Amanda's criticism of Tom's outlook on life aligns him with Hollywood and films in a much grander sense. Amanda berates her son and ends with a melodramatic: "Go, then! Go to the moon — you selfish dreamer!" (96) which reads like another inadvertent filmic reference as it evokes the iconic George Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) image. Even when Amanda is trying to berate her son, Williams gives her the language of a knowing movie fan; one who seeks

to understand the world around him in cinematic terms, one who can't distinguish between real life and cinematic references. To invoke Méliès's famous image is also to point to one of the earliest examples of cinema eschewing its own implicit imperative to represent reality and instead embrace artifice in both mode and presentation. When Tom leaves his "two-by-four situation" (27), he doesn't just leave his sister and his mother, but the dimly-lit reality they embody.

As Tom recites his closing monologue and as the lights dim on the scrims that make the Wingfield apartment look like a screen, Williams displays the very artifice on which *The Glass Menagerie* depends (with its translucent scrims, screen titles, and queer lighting). Tom has essentially gone to the moon after all, climbed into the screen and reproduced that very move for his audience. Following Savran, we can see Williams's "antipathy to theatrical realism" (98)<sup>18</sup> here prefigured in the figure and story of Tom, as the thorough-line which dominates his drama. This artifice and plasticity is very much rooted in a cinematic sensibility both brought on and figured by Williams's surrogate character, Tom. Moving beyond the mere confines of the Wingfield tenement apartment, Williams's Tom and his queer movie fandom can give us a framework through which to study the ways movies offered gay male literary culture a way to approach cinema that needn't be reduced to a camp-like showmanship, hinging as that does on a celebration of gender performance and the very content of the movies. Instead, as Tom does, we can look for those moments in dramatic and literary history where authors found in the very aesthetic form of cinema a way to not (or not merely) identify themselves in the

characters on screen but actually create themselves: to not merely want to go to the movies, but want to be *in* them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While “by 1940 60 million Americans — more than half of the adult population of the United States — went to the movie theaters every week” (Harris 58), the American film industry wouldn’t see record-breaking box office numbers like the ones that had made cinema such lucrative industry at the start of the century (with films like *Gone With The Wind* and *Ben-Hur*) until the summer of 1975 when moviegoers lined up outside cinemas hoping to catch Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws*, thus birthing the age of the aptly titled “blockbuster” into being and reinvigorating a decades long decline in attendance.

<sup>2</sup> In his book *Five Came Back: A History of Hollywood and the Second World War* (2014), Mark Harris presents a detailed study of the changing landscape of Hollywood film production amidst World War II, attending specifically to the ways in which the pull of American jingoism, coupled with famed Hollywood directors being recruited for war coverage, resulted in a renovated approach to recording and editing that sought to emulate the newsreels that were making their way back from Europe.

<sup>3</sup> *The Great Ziegfeld* (1938): I “found it very entertaining — you really had the feeling for a man’s whole life unfolding before you — a rare achievement on the screen” (Notebooks 53), *As You Like It* (1937), *Winterset* (1937) as well as *Gone With the Wind* (1939) are a few of the films that make appearances in Tennessee Williams’s *Notebooks* as well as film star Tallulah Bankhead, Anna Magnani, Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, among others.

<sup>4</sup> As Barton and Palmer point out, Williams (in contrast to his contemporary, Arthur Miller), “sought from the very beginning the popular reputation and the considerable financial rewards that the filming of his plays would provide” (15) acknowledging the way in which “in some respects,” Williams had “been preparing for a career in filmmaking all his life” (15).

<sup>5</sup> In his review of Tennessee Williams’ *Memoirs*, Gore Vidal reminds his readers that contrary to what William would have you believe, that memoir was not the first time his close friend had written something purely for “money” (“It is actually the first piece of work, in the line of writing, that I have undertaken for material profit” [xviii] Williams announces). Dredging up Williams’s time at MGM (which the playwright was loath to remember), Vidal points out that he’d written for money back then when he’d worked on *Marriage is a Private Affair*. Not one to recoil from a well-honed barb, Vidal adds: “unless of course Tennessee now sees in this movie that awesome moral grandeur first detected by the film critic Myra Breckinridge” (142). Myra, Vidal’s protagonist of his 1968 novel of the same name and the focus of my second chapter, recalls watching the Lana Turner film as a child while Vidal constantly cites it as one of his own favorite films.

<sup>6</sup> This is due in no small part to the way Williams's early critics and his scenic and lighting designer Jo Mielziner contextualized the technical breakthrough of the play. For Mielziner, the specific lighting advances that he worked on to create the ease with which scenes blurred into one another, spoke directly to the way film and theater were at once converging even as they sought to move away from one another: "The magic of light opened up a fluid and poetic world of storytelling — selective light that revealed or concealed, advanced a set or made it recede" (141). This "cinematic flow" (Aronson 96), so cited when discussing *The Glass Menagerie's* technical achievements, was for Mielziner indicative of a move in theater to escape the "episodic and rigid format of writing stories in acts and scenes as opposed to employing the techniques of connected thoughts and freedom of movement enjoyed by such mediums as the motion picture camera" (Larson 229).

<sup>7</sup> The 11 plays that were turned into feature films (play dates are for Broadway debuts): *The Glass Menagerie* (play 1945, film 1950), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (play 1947, film 1951), *Summer and Smoke*, (play 1948, film 1961) *The Rose Tattoo* (play 1951, film 1955) *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (play 1955, film 1958), *Orpheus Descending* (play 1957, *The Fugitive Kind* film 1960), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (play 1959, film 1962), *Period of Adjustment* (play 1960, film 1962), *The Night of the Iguana* (play 1961, film 1964), *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (play 1963, *Boom!* film 1968), *The Seven Descents of Myrtle* (play 1968, *The Last of the Mobile Hot Shots* film 1970).

<sup>8</sup> "Breen's assistant Geoffrey Shurlock said of this film that "for the first time we were confronted with a picture that was obviously not for family entertainment... *Streetcar* broke the barrier... Tennessee Williams was something new to movies... The stage got a shock from Tennessee Williams. We got twice the shock. Now we know that a good deal of what we decide in censoring movies is not morality but taste. It began with *Streetcar*." (Palmer & Bray 64). The "Breen Office" is the name given to the government office which oversaw the Motion Picture Production Code when it was under Joseph Breen (1934-1954). Adopted in 1934, the code monitored the morality standards of Hollywood Studios production.

<sup>9</sup> "The Spinning Song" (1943) is one of many of Williams's unpublished and unproduced plays. As C.W.E. Bigsby characterizes it, it is a long "epic melodrama, dated 1943, which has an oblique relation to *Streetcar* in that it is a play about a Southern land-owning family of the kind that eventually produced Stella and Blanche. Indeed, the plantation, like that in *Streetcar*, is actually called Belle Reve, and the play's alternative title, "The Paper Lantern", anticipates the use which he makes of that symbol in the later play" (*Notebooks* 56).



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<sup>10</sup> See for example, Anne Fleche's *Mimetic Disillusion: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams & U.S. Dramatic Realism* (1997) where she places these cinematic flairs in the context of Williams and O'Neill's move away from naturalism. For Fleche, *The Glass Menagerie's* cinematic elements that called "attention to his editorial technique" (68) are diagnostic and indicative of Williams's turn to epic theater, and thus are not quite explored as specifically tied to a cinematic sensibility.

<sup>11</sup> This seems not unlike how D.A. Miller argues that the Broadway musical beckoned him in his early years in *A Place for Us*: "With the same peremptory familiarity did many of us who would become gay men feel addressed by the Broadway musical, which hailed us as directly as if it had been calling out our names, and met us so well that in finding ourselves called for, we seemed to find ourselves, period" (65).

<sup>12</sup> This was one of the reasons why Eisenstein was so praised when it came to revolutionizing film editing: by multiplying the number of cuts and shooting large masses, Eisenstein's films toyed with the idea of pluralizing focus, diluting it among crowds.

<sup>13</sup> In the Broadway production of the play that made its debut on September 26, 2013, John Tiffany (alongside movement director Steven Hoggett), created a vision of *The Glass Menagerie* that unearthed a lot of the lyricism of the play's staging: a pool of dark, viscous liquid separated the audience from the Wingfield tenement, balletic movements that bridged separate scenes, as well as an abstract and seemingly endless fire escape ladder that reached up towards the end of the theater wings, were just a few of the ways in which Tiffany and Hoggett emphasized Williams's "scene of memory." In Ben Brantley's words, "Williams always insisted that memory was not only the subject of *Menagerie* but also its form. But I have never before seen a production that captures so completely or originally the idea of memory as this play's driving dynamic, of recollection as a tyrannical, exorcism-proof ghost waiting to grab you by the ankle" (*New York Times* September 26, 2013). <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/27/theater/reviews/the-glass-menagerie-stars-cherry-jones-and-zachary-quinto.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>14</sup> In their June 11 1945 issue, *Life* magazine chose these short scenes as exemplifying the power of Laurette Taylor's performance as Amanda showcasing "the scenes which 1945 playgoers recognize as the finest acting done on Broadway this season" (13). The twenty photographs (arranged as three by three panels in two opposite pages) catch Taylor's reaction shots to the one-sided conversation on the telephone with accompanying captions taken from Williams's play. Her performance won raves and has since haunted every production of the play. Of Taylor Williams once said: "Of course I consider her the greatest artist of her profession that I have known... There was a radiance about her art which I can compare only to the greatest lines of poetry, and which gave me the same shock of revelation, as if the air about us had been momentarily broken through by light from some clear space around us" (Gottlieb n.p.)

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<sup>15</sup> In the production notes, Williams makes this clear: “The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits or female saints or madonnas” (xxi-xxii). The last scene of the play, where Laura and Jim share an intimate conversation and an impromptu kiss (before he reveals he’s engaged to be married), hinges on Laura’s “inner light” even as the scene itself is played out during a power outage. The entire scene, which goes from the confusion over the blackout to the intimate conversation between Laura and Jim about their shared high school experience and her menagerie is telegraphed accordingly through lighting cues and imagery. This scene, which for Laura, is the “climax of her secret life” (70) begins with Jim in the “limelight” (72) and Laura crouching behind the light. After urging Laura to come closer to the candelabrum that lights them as he can hardly see her, Jim’s memories of high school (courtesy of the aptly named *Torch* yearbook which Laura keeps at hand throughout the scene) begin to dissolve her shyness. When the familiarity with Jim continues, Williams tells us Jim’s warmth and charm “light her inwardly with altar candles” (79). It is no surprise that Tom, in reconstructing this scene and ending the play, evokes this type of language: “Blow out your candles, Laura” he tells us before the curtain falls.

<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the role of Tom Wingfield has been played by actors as varied as Rip Torn (1976, to Maureen Stapleton’s Amanda), Bruce Davidson (1983, against Jessica Tandy), John Malkovich (1983 opposite Joanne Woodward), Željko Ivanek (1994, with Julie Harris), Christian Slater (2005, Jessica Lange) and Sam Waterston on screen (against Katharine Hepburn) in 1973. Amanda has also been at the center of marketing campaigns for the play ever since it premiered on Broadway. The original playbill featured a composite picture of Amanda and Tom, while the last two revivals on Broadway have centered solely on Amanda: David Leveux’s 2005 revival used a simple black and white picture of Jessica Lange on its playbill while Gordon Edelstein’s 2010 production with Judith Ivey as Amanda, featured a drawn picture of “The Mother” sitting in a chair with a typewriter and a white rose at her feet, presumably symbolizing her children.

<sup>17</sup> See also, Ruby Cohn’s *Dialogue in American Theater* (1971) who argues that “the stage viability of the play has always rested upon the character of Amanda” (101); Foster Hirsch presents Amanda as “the central character” of the play in *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams* (1979), a sentiment shared by Marc Robinson in *The Other American Drama* (1994).

<sup>18</sup> In fact, Savran argues that it is only “in the wake of Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Mabou Mines, and the Wooster Group (among others)” (98) that one can begin to understand this antipathy.

## CHAPTER TWO

“A spiritual child of the Forties”; Gore Vidal’s *Myra Breckinridge* and the Transgressive

Pleasures of Hollywood’s Queer Fans

“I think movies are the answer.”

“To what?”

“The world.”

— Gore Vidal, *Hollywood*

From its conception, the protagonist of Gore Vidal’s *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) was mythical, exceeding the imagination of her own creator. In *Point to Point Navigation* (2007), Vidal remembers how the eponymous character came to be. Admitting that what became the novel’s opening line (“I am Myra Breckinridge whom no man may possess; clad only in garter belt and one dress shield”) “took possession of [him],” Vidal tells his readers that,

The voice roared on. Who was she? I could only find out if I kept on writing. She was obsessed with Hollywood movies. That was soon clear. No matter how kitsch a film she could swiftly penetrate its mystical magical marshmallow core. Even so, it was not until I was halfway through the story that I realized she had been a male critic who had changed his sex: Myron had become Myra. Why? I wrote on, laughing. (142)

It is not surprising that Vidal describes Myra as a seductive and roaring voice, a character capable of existing beyond his own grasp. This reaction underscores Myra’s own narrative force in both the 1968 novel that bears her name and in its 1974 sequel, *Myron*. In the former, passing herself off as Myron’s wife, she aims to claim her late husband’s rightful share of his mother’s inheritance from his uncle, an aging Western star who has

set up an Academy of Drama and Modeling. While Uncle Buck has his lawyers investigate why he's never heard of his nephew's wife ("he was a fag or so I always thought" [22]), Myra teaches at the academy, yearns romantically for the classic films of the forties, and aims to "possess men" (17) so as to conquer their gendered world. At the end, she is mysteriously run over, and due to health complications, she loses her silicone breasts and goes back to being Myron; he marries a young girl, becomes a Christian Scientist, and works for Planned Parenthood. In the later novel, much like a movie villain, Myra returns and possesses (quite literally) not only Myron's body but that of actress Maria Montez in an outrageous plot that transports her back in time to the film lots where Montez's misfire *The Siren of Babylon* was filmed in 1948. Currently out of print (last published in 1997 as a Penguin Twentieth Century Classic) while many of Vidal's other novels enjoy continued successful printings, *Myra Breckinridge* remains a curio footnote in Vidal's career, especially in relation to his other more well-known (and oft-taught) LGBT novel, *The City and the Pillar* (1948). When discussed, the novel is mostly taken up as a way to answer the question *Time* magazine posed upon its publication: "Has literary decency fallen so low — or has fashionable camp risen that high"? ("Myra the Messiah").

In the years since *Myra Breckinridge* was published, critics and scholars have clung to Vidal's own way of reacting to Myra's allure ("Who was she?") as well as her irreverence ("I wrote on, laughing"). Talk of its prurient sex governed the initial response to the novel, epitomized by the line Little Brown Press used to promote it: "Everything you've heard about *Myra Breckinridge* is true!" By 1970, Vidal's text, then in its twelfth

printing, was marketed as a must-read event in anticipation of the Raquel Welch-starring film adaptation, its jacket proudly stating, “Never before has a book been so hotly discussed, and never has a film been so impatiently awaited!” While the latter claim seems suspect, the former is more readily verifiable. By the time of its publication, *Myra Breckinridge* had, in fact, got everyone talking about the book’s sexual taboos (a transsexual protagonist, a female sadomasochistic talent agent, a physical examination turned anal rape, a party turned orgy) but also about Little Brown’s decision to bypass reviews. This unheard-of marketing move, coming from an author who had had steady critical and best-selling success with novels such as *Williwaw* (1946) set in the contemporary world of the Second World War, and the historical novel, *Washington, D.C.* (1967) the year before, set up Vidal’s novel as an underground book with a secret plot-twist best left unspoiled by advance reviewers.<sup>1</sup> Through all these different conversations about Vidal’s novel, what has been at the center of discussions of Myron-cum-Myra is her queerness. In the critical conversation that followed the 1968 best-seller, what came as a late discovery for Vidal himself has overshadowed what will concern the rest of this chapter: Myra’s ability to penetrate the “mystical magical marshmallow core” (142) of even the kitschiest of films.

Just as initial reviewers focused on what the *New York Times* referred to as the novel’s “standard gamey bits” (MacBride 44), later critical conversations of Vidal’s text have centered on *Myra Breckinridge*’s sexual and gendered ambiguity.<sup>2</sup> This was further encouraged by the way the 1970 film adaptation was derided because of its unabashedly queer sensibility. Exemplary of the offensive language and critical lambast the film was

subject to, the *Newark Sunday News* stated “the picture has an anal fixation that will please only a fag audience” (Bahrenburg 58). Despite the film’s full title, *Gore Vidal’s Myra Breckinridge* was disowned by Vidal himself, and in turn by its cast. Most infamously, film critic Rex Reed, who played Myron in the film, published a picture essay skewering the film and its troubled production in the pages of *Playboy* to coincide with the film’s release. In due time, as David Scott Diffrient points out in his essay on the trashy and campy reception of the film, *Myra Breckinridge* was “resurrected on the gay, lesbian, and avant-garde circuits” precisely because its production depended on a queered version of film history so attuned to the changing landscape of Hollywood in the late 1960s (69). *Gore Vidal’s Myra Breckinridge*’s status as a campy cult film has in many ways taken over Vidal’s own more nuanced, if equally irreverent creation. In another negative review of the film, critic Joe Rosen points out that “What was anal in the book is banal in the movie” (“*Myra Breckinridge* is a Big Zero”).

This chapter will focus on Myra’s seriousness — about things both banal and anal — within the context of queer film fandom. It is fitting that Myra’s reputation would depend on a film now understood as both “the *last* movie of its kind — a big Hollywood studio movie” (Rebello 47) and “perhaps the most reviled studio production ever” (Hoberman AR11). This contradiction is intrinsic to Myra herself whose own self-fashioning depends on the glory of Hollywood studio cinema, and her attendant perversion of it. I locate Myra’s interest in the magical marshmallow core of Hollywood cinema alongside Vidal’s own late-career pronouncements on the subjects — in works that are, at first look, more serious and academic than his 1968 “satirical aria” (Parini

280): his 1990 historical novel, *Hollywood* and his 1991 Harvard lectures, *Screening History*. Thus, rather than dismiss Myra as a camp figure whose hyperbolic approach to Hollywood filmmaking need be deemed intentionally laughable and wholly disposable, I see her investment in the films and stars of the 1930s and 1940s as crystallizing the way 1960s public discourse about cinema both depended on and emerged as antithetical to *mere* film fandom. Written in the late 1960s on the brink of both the end of the Motion Picture Code and the beginning of the modern LGBT movement, Vidal's novel brings together queer sexuality and Hollywood studio film in the figure of Myra, the physical embodiment of a queer movie fan, showing us both its promise and its all-too threatening nature. The threat, of course, was located precisely in the way Myra conflated and celebrated the anal and the banal. Myra's queer film fandom points us to the threat that all fandom is potentially queer.

This chapter will use twentieth century film history (and indeed the *filmed* history of the twentieth century) to re-examine Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge*, a text that is central both to these historical discussions as well as its contemporaneous LGBT movement. From its mid-60s position, *Myra Breckinridge* is a text that elicits discussions that shuttle between different eras. Following this edict, this chapter begins in the early 1990s where Vidal's *Hollywood* and *Screening History* help establish the centrality of cinema and history to understandings of Vidal's own queer film fandom in general and his conception of *Myra Breckinridge* in particular. Her centrality (both historical and cultural) when it comes to queer culture and film history will underscore the way Vidal understands the filmic history of the twentieth century (its *screened* history) to be irrevocably intertwined

with gay history, allowing queer film fandom to emerge as a way to articulate a relation between cinema and queer sexuality in the figure of Myra.

Just as in chapter one, I use the term “queer film fan” to describe a figure whose queer sexuality intersects in profound ways with a fascination with Hollywood cinema, as well as a character whose fanaticism for cinema depends on a queered understanding of Hollywood. Myra Breckinridge, who has a “profile like Fay Wray” (1) and who has a “careful low-pitched voice, modeled on that of the late Ann Sheridan (fifth reel of *Doughgirls*)” (12) embodies queer film fandom in both of these ways. This becomes apparent early on in the novel when Myra, whose journal we are reading throughout, confesses that she (as Myron before her) is inspired by film critic Parker Tyler, author of *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (1947). Written by a gay man, this book was one of the first to seriously consider the centrality of cinema in twentieth century American culture. Despite its pseudo-academic title, Tyler’s monograph revels instead in high-camp,<sup>f</sup> which for Tyler is a “a perfectly valid instrument of criticism, particularly in terms of an art offering the public so many crass charades as the movies did and still do” (12). Tyler was especially interested in the crass charades that molded and upheld certain normative sexual and gendered identities. Moviegoing in itself was a practice that Tyler located in a metaphorical bedroom; “From the capacity of the screen for trick illusion, plus the dark-enshrouded passivity of the spectator, issues a state of daydream... the screen is the focus of light, while the spectator is conscious in a darkness of the bedroom” (xxv). The rhetoric of dreams, ones had in an intimate and sexually-coded bedroom, is pervasive in Tyler’s work. Part of his project is to lay bare the ways movies enter our dreams and



codify our behavior in ways not unlike the Olympian gods of the ancient Greeks.<sup>3</sup> But just as Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* explores, the slippage between cinema theaters as dream repositories and places of illicit sex is prevalent in Tyler's own language. Like Tyler, Myra is equally interested in the collision and collusion between moviegoing and sexuality. As a burgeoning young film critic, we are told Myron wrote an extended treatise on the buttocks of Western stars ("from austere aspiring Gothic flat ass Hoot Gibson to impertinent baroque ass James Garner" [23]), and as a devotee of Tyler and the male body, Myra agrees that she's always been excited by men's rear ends "possibly because it is in some way involved with my passion for 'backstage,' for observing what is magic from the unusual, privileged angle," (77) a line that cannot help but echo Tyler's own project and serve as a definition of the queer film fan.

The experience of one besotted by the 'backstage' of cinema and male bodies is what concerns *Myra Breckinridge*. Vidal's novel repurposes the film fandom of the author's own youth and in so doing attempts to represent the relationship queer boys have had with cinema for the latter part of the twentieth century. "I saw and heard my first movie in 1929" at age four, he notes in his Harvard lectures, "I am told that I marched down the aisle, an actress on the screen asked another character a question, and I answered her, in a very loud voice" (*Screening History* 6). From the beginning of his life, Vidal understood the screen less as an existing barrier between those characters "thirty times my size" (6) and himself, and more as a place that housed figures that invited his own engagement with them. This is a recurring image of fandom. As Samantha Barbas notes in *Movie Crazy* (2002), "The story of film fandom, in large part, is the story of the

way that fans refused to accept mass culture passively and, instead, became actively involved in their entertainment” (4). But Vidal’s recollection is all the more illuminating for its familiarity. Here I would point not only to the Tennessee Williams anecdote in chapter one where he recalls having wanted to climb the screen and join the action, but to James Baldwin’s early memories in his Hollywood-centered collection of essays, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976). Another queer film fan, Baldwin opens that work with an extended memory of Joan Crawford in *Dance, Fools, Dance* (1931) that recurs in an encounter with a colored woman on his street who “looked exactly like Joan Crawford” (4) and which, for the remainder of the anecdote, he refers to as “Miss Crawford.” For Baldwin, cinema was a way to understand the reality around him. “A child is far too self-centered,” he notes, “to relate to any dilemma which does not, somehow, relate to him — to his own evolving dilemma” (3). He elaborates on this pronouncement when he recalls how the sight of Bette Davis (“in close-up, over a champagne glass, pop-eyes popping”<sup>4</sup> [7]) led him for the first time, to see his own sense of race on screen, for Davis “moved just like a nigger” (7).

Vidal and Baldwin’s anecdotes are particularly striking because they offer a different model of star-gazing than the one usually theorized when discussing gay men and Hollywood stars. In both cases, the proto-queer child sees not himself on screen, nor a proxy character with whom he will identify, but a world opening up to him that raises questions (both literal and figurative) about who he is and the world he will come to inhabit as a minority. This is precisely what José Esteban Muñoz zeroes in on when using Baldwin’s anecdote to describe the “survival strategies the minority subject practices in

order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Muñoz’s description of the “disidentification” at work in Baldwin’s text focuses on the writer’s ability to transform “the raw materials of identification (the linear match that leads towards interpellation) while simultaneously positioning himself within and outside the image of the movie star” (18). Muñoz’s argument locates Baldwin in a complicated relationship with Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, one that doesn’t depend on mere star-gazing and other means of “linear” identification or interpellation (we might say though, that it is also not *not* identification), nor on the critical distance of camp and critique. That is, Baldwin is able to both understand the various workings of Hollywood (“here, before me, after all, was a *movie star*” [7]) while also negotiating the affective relationship to that movie star that the activity of moviegoining depends on.

Baldwin’s anecdote hinges on a decidedly queer form of film fandom. The actresses that fascinate and repel him (Crawford and Davis) have become iconically queer figures. Yet rather than a move towards wanting to *be* those glamorous, powerful (and for that, transgressive) women, Baldwin offers us a different model. Evincing such a process, which usually calls on the inherent performativity of queerness in the fan’s attempt to *be* Joan Crawford so as to bed her co-star Clark Gable, Baldwin’s anecdote lies more in line with the way David Halperin understands what he calls “gay femininity.” As he writes, the “feminine position that gay male subjects take up” when relating to the Hollywood starlet “both reflects and expresses a distinctive situatedness within an entire field of discourses and social practices” (337). That feminine position, he notes, “is not

exclusively defined by the directionality of erotic desire and a corresponding gender role, nor is its meaning exhausted by them” (337). Halperin’s language here overlaps with Muñoz’s vision of disidentification, both in the way it plots the queer subject spatially in regards to its object of (dis)identification and in the way it encodes in this relationship a seeming contradiction. Halperin is perhaps offering a more nuanced version of Muñoz’s but at the heart of both interventions in queer male culture’s relationship with female Hollywood stars is the refusal to understand such a relation in straightforward identificatory ways. It is Baldwin’s vision of Davis and Crawford as like-*and*-unlike-him (they are white stars, he a black moviegoer) which motivates his childhood understanding of his mother and himself, as well as his adult musings on those formative childhood moments.

I want to frame Muñoz’s Baldwin childhood anecdote within the theorist’s next book, *Cruising Utopia* (2009) to further elucidate its usefulness in framing a discussion of the queer film fandom at work in *Myra Breckinridge*. A project interested in the performative present (both literal and figurative) and thus one not particularly concerned with cinema, *Cruising Utopia* nevertheless offers a helpful framework with which to locate the political potential of queer film fandom. Muñoz rightly diagnoses the way in which the turn to queer aesthetics is not an escape from the social realm but instead a way to map future social relations. “Queerness,” he writes, “is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1). I would like to suggest that cinema, particularly in the way it was conceived as a nostalgic pastime for gay men in the late 1960s (the time period Muñoz is

discussing), can be thought of as one of those “other worlds” Muñoz describes. That is, cinema, in portraying scenes and narratives necessarily different from our own is in itself a concrete repository of ‘other worlds,’ from Dorothy’s Oz and Snow White’s forest to Orson Welles’ New York and Victor Fleming’s Atlanta. In fact, when describing the model of approaching the past as plotted by Ernst Bloch, Muñoz’s language while predictably Romantic in spirit, nevertheless echoes cinema itself. He says the idea is to “animate” the past (27) and look into this no-longer conscious past whose “ephemeral traces, *flickering illuminations* from other times and places, are sites that may indeed appear merely romantic” (28, emphasis added). Later he calls on our ability to tap into “other visual frequencies” in order to see the ghosts of lost experience (42), explicitly evoking Jacques Derrida’s “techno-media” vocabulary which inescapably invokes film.<sup>5</sup> Cinema, especially during its early decades, depended on the promise of being able to at once capture the present and animate the past. It is not surprising that Baldwin, in looking back at his own childhood manages to imagine for himself a more hopeful present for himself and his mother. After all, despite what his father told him, there were uglier women than his mother out in the world; some of them were even (white) movie stars.

Myra reformulates her Hollywood archives, making them “rich antinormative treasure troves of queer possibility” (*Disidentification x*). This is not only because she presents her own body as a living performance, made in the image of stars like Davis and Garbo, but because, like Jack Smith and Marga Gomez (the central figures in Muñoz’s text), she uses humor as “a valuable pedagogical and political project” (xi). Myra’s fascination and in-depth knowledge of the cinema produced between 1935 and 1945 is

intertwined with her mission to “re-create the sexes and thus save the human race from extinction” (5). This hyperbolic assertion is nevertheless couched in her conviction that cinema’s crass charades have slowly destroyed American males who, without Clark Gable and Jimmy Stewart, have been left to “compensate by *playing* at being men, wearing cowboy clothes, boots, black leather, attempting through clothes, (what an age for the fetishist!) to impersonate the kind of man our society *claims* to admire” (115). In *Myra*, Vidal creates a figure whose fascination with Parker Tyler, a “movie fan of sorts” (*Magic and Myth* 16), leads her to embody the very queer film fandom that Muñoz’s project might imagine. Myra’s interest in the way cinema excites and determines, tests and produces queer sexualities depends on how she wears the cinematic past as a way to refashion an American future; it is a “backward glance that enacts a future vision” (*Cruising Utopia* 4). Queer film fandom for Myra (and Vidal) becomes a utopian gesture, one which allows characters like Myra to imagine a future born out of the pasts projected on screen.

Myra’s pronouncements become all the more powerful by the way they return in Vidal’s later works. Following the 1990 publication of *Hollywood*, a novel concerned with the way movies were “like walking dreams that then, in sleep, usurped proper dreams” (*Hollywood* 194), Vidal gave his *Screening History* lectures. There, with Breckinridge-like flair he stated that, “Movies changed our world forever,” grandly pronouncing that,

As the whole world is more and more linked by satellites, the world’s view of the world can be whatever a producer chooses to make it. I am stating

all these obvious things because I may have given the impression that I was going to confine myself to those 90 minute entertainments that were screened in the theaters of my youth. Actually, my subject is how, through ear and eye, we are both defined and manipulated by fictions of such potency that they are able to replace our own experience. (32)

Echoing Myra, Vidal's sentences move from the first person singular to the first person plural; his memories give way to "our own experience," presenting his youth as exemplary of the larger American experience. Furthermore, Vidal's choice of words ("the world's view of the world") cannot help but echo another contemporary of Myra: Stanley Cavell, whose *The World Viewed* (1971) argues "that coming to know what films are — what film is — is inseparable from acquiring self-knowledge" (Rothman & Keane 10). This is the promise of *Hollywood*, the premise of *Screening History*, and the process at work in Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work*, all of which come together in Vidal's protagonist.

*Myra Breckinridge*, written almost twenty-five years before, not only anticipates these "obvious things," but crucially connects them with notions of American masculinity and queer sexuality. While Myra and the satirical book that introduced her to the world have been read as a "smutty joke" (Boatwright 20) — either "Vidal's own joke on himself" (Mitzel 34) or "an in-joke between Myra/Vidal and the reader" (Eisner 261) — Vidal's late-career interest in the power of cinema forcefully repurposes Myra's own pronouncements on the subject. Indeed, Caroline Sanford, the newspaper publisher-turned silent film star and producer at the center of *Hollywood* (published in 1990, set in the 1920s), is at once Myra's predecessor and her literary heir. I want to pause on *Hollywood* not only to show how its narrative performs the arguments posed by

*Screening History* but to show how it constructs the burgeoning film industry in the years before the Hollywood studios system was put in place, one which quite explicitly hoped to define and manipulate viewer's own experiences.

*Hollywood* follows a two-pronged interrogation into the political and cultural climate of the United States in the 1920s through two fictional characters: James Burden Day, a Washington senator who offers us an entry point into the world of politics in Washington D.C., and Caroline Sanford, editor of the *Washington Tribune*, who moves to California and gives us a glimpse into the film industry.<sup>6</sup> The Washington narrative observes the behind-the-scenes drama at the White House against the backdrop of the Great War, the peace settlement talks that followed, and the troubled last months of Woodrow Wilson's presidency. Caroline's narrative places her squarely in the thick of the newly established film industry, finding herself both a film star and a film producer after appearing in a low-budget turned hit silent film titled *The Huns from Hell*. The twinned narratives point to Vidal's conviction that cinema was as political an enterprise as the journalism of William Hearst, Caroline's mentor in the novel, and more famously remembered as the inspiration for Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941).

By the end of the novel (ca. 1923), Caroline understands that, as the great European powers were waning and America's own supremacy was on the rise, the future of history-making would not rest solely on Washington and those smoke-filled rooms that could wield enough power to dictate party nominations, but on the darkened theaters that were springing up all around the country. At one point in the novel, she finds herself



daydreaming about movies and their then-untapped power. As she stares at the stack of newspapers and their headlines, it dawns on her that movies could move beyond the mere propaganda which George Creel, chairman of the Committee on Public Information, was proposing. Movies, she thinks, had the power to surround the audience “as a moving picture did and so, literally, inhabit their dreams, both waking and sleeping, made for another reality parallel to the one they lived in.” Confidently, she concludes that “Reality could now be entirely invented and history revised” (195). This conviction, that movies could not just reflect but invent a reality is what keeps Caroline in Hollywood. Realizing that the old historical films like *Huns from Hell* that had made Emma Traxler (her film alter ego) a star were no longer as successful, Caroline is finally seduced by her director/lover Timothy X. Farrell’s idea of using movies is to make people really feel and persuade them in a visceral way:

Caroline suddenly realized that she — and everyone else — had been approaching this new game from the wrong direction. Movies were not there simply to reflect life or tell stories but to exist in their own autonomous way and to look, as it were, back at those who made them and watched them. They had used movies successfully to demonize national enemies. Now why not use them to alter the viewer’s perception of himself and the world? (359-61)

This narrative is familiar to cinema theorists who have looked at cinema’s first decades as creating and depending on an audience who saw the images on screen as real. This is precisely what set cinema apart from other similar technologies of the early twentieth century. As Mary Ann Doane puts it, “The indexicality of the cinematic sign appears as the guarantee of its status as a record of a temporality outside itself — a pure time or duration which would not be that of its own functioning. This is what imbues cinematic

time with historicity” (23). Cinema’s historicity is precisely what Vidal finds so fascinating about it as a medium, and what becomes more pronounced but all the more problematic once cinema becomes almost exclusively an entertainment medium. While cinema began as yet another recording technology used to amuse, finding its way into music halls and vaudeville acts, by the mid-1910s the impetus towards realism and narrative dictated what would become its primary mode of production. By the end of the decade “the facticity of the representation was willingly conflated with the historical reality of the events recreated” (Shail 64): that was a real train coming at the camera at one point in time, those were real stunts and slapstick humor in the comedies of Chaplin and Keaton, that was Emma Traxler actually tied up in the train tracks in *Huns from Hell*. The photorealism and the audience’s gamble that what they were seeing was (or had) been real is what initially seduced viewers. Yet, as pioneers of the medium such as D.W. Griffith (and Timothy X. Farrell in *Hollywood*) understood, the grand potential of movies was their ability to not only re-tell, but to create an American mythology, precisely because movies “get into people’s dreams” (*Hollywood* 437). Caroline’s rhetoric picks up a long history of speaking of cinema in terms of dreams. Usually used as an attack on cinema as a medium and especially as an ideological vessel (cinema as a dream implies that what is on screen is somehow less real than what it purports to represent) its power rests on the way movies depended on and tapped into viewers’ subconsciousness. This insidious aspect of cinema’s power — which was employed in the 1930s and 1940s to its full propagandist potential both in the US and abroad<sup>7</sup> — nevertheless speaks to the very personal relationship that viewers in general and fans in particular, experienced when

going to the movies, the place where they could see their dreams thirty times their own size.

Keenly attuned to this history, Myra fashions herself as indebted to those very dreams, telling us that she “exist[s] entirely outside the usual human experience... outside and yet wholly relevant for [she is] the New Woman<sup>8</sup> whose astonishing history is a poignant amalgam of vulgar dreams and knife-sharp realities” (2). Those “vulgar dreams,” which so motivate the character of Caroline Sanford in *Hollywood*, are precisely how Myra fashions herself: her body is an endless pastiche of film actresses. In the first page of Vidal’s novel she says she resembles Fay Wray “left three quarter profile if the key light is no more than five feet high during the close shot” (1). This allusion to the star of *King Kong* (1933) and the technologies enabling her visibility leave the reader wondering whether the three-quarter profile resemblance depends on a close shot of Wray or Myra herself. The resemblance depends not on mere likeness but on a mediated likeness. Likewise, her breasts are “reminiscent of those sported by Jean Harlow in *Hell’s Angels*” (3), her voice can go from the low-pitched voice of Anne Sheridan (12) to having “a husky Jean Arthur note” (50), or “a sweet tone not unlike Irene Dunne in *The White Cliffs of Dover*” (106). She can also whisper “like Phyllis Thaxter in *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*” (147), be “stern but pleasant, like Eve Arden” (70) and even sound to her “own ears” “like Laraine Day” (171). Moreover, Myra finds herself choosing actresses (notably *not* characters: she is Fay Wray, never “Ann Darrow” from *King Kong*). This is a materialist (dis)identification that locates Myra both within and outside those stars she evokes. Like Baldwin, Myra understands that those are movie stars on screen thirty times

her size but by appropriating them for her own self-fashioning (particularly one that involves gender bending) she asserts her agency while being wholly dependent on the magic and myth which the stars represent and which Myra, in various ways, hopes to affect. Indeed that agency depends on her knowledge of Hollywood's star-machine as well as its dependence on gender performance. Myron's transformation into Myra, mediated as it is for readers in a collage of actresses and their mannerisms, mirrors the type of star make-overs that are so common in Hollywood. Like Myra, stars were not born but created, and while Myra may not have signed a studio contract, her physical transformation echoes that of star-turns in the early decades of studio Hollywood where "dressmakers and makeup artists gave [unknown actresses] a flawless appearance, studio executives bestowed a new name, and publicists endowed her with a set of fabricated personality traits" (Barbas 136). But this is no mere diva worship or camp appropriation. As Richard Dyer in his seminal text, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1986) points out, "Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, and historically constructed" (17). It is in her appropriation of Wray and Arden that Myra falls into familiar camp territory. Her citations of these stars' mannerisms no doubt evoke images of female impersonators who have for decades now entertained knowing crowds with their arched Crawford-like eyebrows, popped Bette Davis eyes, and Garland-mimicking wit. But while there is humor in Vidal's frame, I am more interested in the way what may come off as an in-joke between Vidal and the reader (akin to that between a drag queen and her audience), can be also understood as a deeply complex set of practices that queer

fans engage in when faced with Hollywood stars of the 1930s and 1940s. Myra's laughable and hyperbolic language (especially when pitted against Vidal's own) requires one to imagine a way to engage with her project and getting in on her joke without taking it too seriously. This is what Vidal's frame accomplishes; by making us read Myra's diary (at times quite literally over her shoulder: "There is a crash outside my window — was a crash (in the time I took to write 'there is a crash' the tense changed)" she writes at one point [17]), Vidal allows us a level of intimacy premised on our own readerly distance. Within that framework, though, Vidal is able to intervene in queer discourses, making Myra a mouthpiece for a type of queer radical that made her a straw-woman for both the right and the left.

It is not my intent to wrestle Myra out of the camp tradition which she both represents and has since further engendered (after all, Raquel Welch was purportedly cast as Myra because she looked like a drag queen). Instead, I want to suggest that Myra's flirtation with camp and Vidal's deployment of it get at the specific ways in which fandom and queerness coincide. Much like campy queens whose performances depend on the artifice of performance, fans "don't have to be told those are photographs of actors impersonating characters" (Kael 65). As film critic Pauline Kael writes in her seminal "Trash, Art, and the Movies" (1969), fans "are able to know, and often know much more about both the actors and the characters they are impersonating and about how and why the movie has been made than is consistent with theatrical illusion" (65). Myra's understanding and appropriation of Hollywood myths complicates Caroline's image of cinema; what happens when audience members (those whose dreams are reflected and

created on screen) become fans who are keenly aware of the construction of said dreams but nevertheless partake and build relations and identities in keeping with those dreams? This knowingness allows us to talk about fans in ways that are seemingly indistinct from how we discuss camp. Camp, like fandom, enacts a divide between those who are in on the joke and those who are not. Like fandom, camp creates a “network of mutual recognition of complicity,” a grouping of people “already initiated into the circuits of shared perception and appreciation” (Halperin 189). With her endless barrage of film references Myra establishes herself as a knowing fan, but also crucially constructs her reader as a fellow fan, one who will understand what she means when she describes Rusty Godowsky, a handsome young man in Buck’s Academy, as having “a curving mouth on the order of the late Richard Cromwell, so satisfyingly tortured in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*,” or that his girl-friend Mary-Ann is “reminiscent of Lupe Velez” (31). In making an argument about the way certain cultural objects (say, *Mommie Dearest* [1981]) help to inadvertently build gay male communities, Halperin quotes an unpublished David Caron lecture at length that is helpful in illuminating the ways in which camp and fandom overlap when talking of queer experiences:

“Far from reproducing an exclusionary class structure, camp simultaneously produces and is produced by a community of equals. In its most outrageous manifestations it mocks social inequalities by enacting them to an absurd degree. Camp, then, is a mode of being-with-friends. I am talking of collective, group friendship, here, not of a one-on-one relationship.” And Caron adds, “Collective friendship, [like camp] exists only in and throughout its own enactment. It is decentered and unruly. It goes nowhere and produces nothing other than itself. It is therefore, a social critique at work, in that it flouts the supposedly mature models of socialization — the couple, the production of children — and reclaims an

evolutionary stage we were supposed to discard long ago along with sexual indeterminacy.” (Halperin 190)

This “mode of being-with-friends” is precisely what Kael imagines when she notes that the romance of movies wasn’t merely of the stories and people on screen but “the adolescent dream of meeting others who feel as you do about what you’ve seen” (Kael 65-66). Moreover, these decentered and unruly communities have — as Caron and Kael’s language suggests — a particular affinity for remaining in earlier developmental stages. Halperin is keenly attuned to this — he footnotes this moment with a reference to Heather Love, who notes camp’s “refusal to get over childhood pleasures” (quoted in Halperin 487). A move out of adolescence and sexual indeterminacy would seem to dictate a move out of the knowing pleasures of camp and film fandom. Despite the novel’s insistence on the immediacy of its narration (in writing in her journal, Myra attempts to offer us “the absolute truth, copied, precisely from life, preferably at the moment it is happening” [18]), the novel gives us one glimpse of Myra as a child in a scene that, unsurprisingly, places her at the movies. I want to pause on this early anecdote (mere pages into Vidal’s novel, before Myra sets the novel’s plot in motion) because it epitomizes how Myra’s fascination with cinema is intimately tied to a queer sexual awakening and a larger concern with American history-making, not to mention one framed within those childhood pleasures Love and Kael discuss. Implicitly agreeing with Myra’s notion that she “shall not begin at the beginning since there is no beginning, only a middle into which” readers stray (4), Vidal nevertheless makes a point of telling us how Myra first fell in love with cinema. At the age of seven, she watched her first movie, *Marriage is a Private Affair* (1944).<sup>9</sup> This important moment in her life is indexed by her

very own film fandom: for her own benefit she writes that the film starred “Lana Turner, James Craig and the late John Hodiak; [and was] produced by Sandro S. Berman and directed by Robert Leonard” (10). The transformative moment that Myra then briefly narrates locates her fandom as beginning in a moment of childish glee. Rather than present this as a moment she hopes to recreate in her adult life, we find that Myra’s childhood fandom was always already tinged with a sexual indeterminacy that she never grows out of. While in chapter one we saw an early figuration of the mooning teenage girl (Judy Garland in *The Broadway Melody of 1938* singing “You Made Me Love You, I Didn’t Want To Do It” to a picture of Clark Gable) whose desire is chaste and framed as a narrative impossibility, not to mention squarely located within a heterosexual pairing however improbable, Vidal presents us here with cinema as a gateway to queer sexual awakenings. What was a childish desire in Garland and only a euphemistic conceit in *The Glass Menagerie* gets wholly subsumed in sexual desire in Vidal’s vision.

Myra tells us how watching *Marriage is a Private Affair* led her to experience queer sexual attachments to both its leading lady (a “lesbian phase” wherein as “a small girl [she] used to yearn for Lana Turner to crush [her] against her heavy breasts, murmuring ‘I love you, Myra, you perfect darling!’” [10]) and its leading man (“I practiced self-abuse thinking of that voice, those shoulders, those powerful thighs thrust between my own” [10]). Right away then, Vidal presents Myra as a queer figure who, despite having been born a man, re-imagines her childhood fascination with Lana Turner as one couched in the language of lesbianism: “Not that a straightforward invitation from the young Lana Turner or the young Ava Gardner might not, as they say out here, ‘turn



me on,' but luckily for me there is no longer a young Lana Turner or Ava Gardner and so my lust has taken a different and quite spectacular form since Myron's death," she tells us (85). This reconstruction also leads Myra to reconfigure her attachment to Craig as a young boy in terms of normative sexuality. Myra's commitment to speaking about her differently gendered selves as separate people through the first two thirds of the novel makes it hard to parse out how much of this recollection is an attempt to fashion for herself a new childhood. In any combination, though, her childhood memory of the sexual feelings aroused by Turner and Craig, emerge as queer: she was either a boy whose fascination with a maternal Turner turned into a homosexual obsession with Craig, or a girl in a boy's body who saw her fixation on Turner in the same language of compulsory heterosexuality (her lesbianism is merely a phase). In Halperin's words, here is Myra as an example of "those children who acquire a non-standard or dissident gender or sexual identity... in relation to mainstream cultural forms. Either they have to *invent* perverse relations to such forms, or they have to *find* in such forms opportunities or occasions or permissions for particular non-standard ways of feeling" (346). Indeed, Myra's unabashed sexual longings for Craig ("if I may be candid, no matter what condition James Craig is in today, married or not, decrepit or not, Myra Breckinridge is ready to give him a good time for old times' sake" [10]) position her desire as overriding any socially acceptable boundaries, whether they be of age or gender. For critics like Douglas Eisner this is merely an example of the way the novel "is queer while stabilizing normative sexuality" (267) in that every pairing it presents can be broken into a male and a female figure. Yet, the novel spends just as much time deconstructing such rigid notions

of gender so that the “normative sexuality” with which the novel ends (a breast-less and balding Myron happily living with Mary Ann in the California suburbs) becomes a mere cosmetic accident rather than a prescriptive dictum. Myron may renounce his ill-fated run as ball-breaker Myra, but that the novel traces the journey of a supposedly “sissy kid” (21) to a suburban heterosexual (if neutered) man via a lesbian transexual still exemplifies Myra’s belief that “it is demonstrably true that desire can take as many shapes as there are containers. Yet what one pours into those containers is always the same inchoate human passion, entirely lacking in definition until what holds it shapes it” (233). This decidedly queer vision of desire (ever-flowing, untethered to any object) is again redeployed in another film-centered context when Myra later confesses her wish to be able to step back in time to visit the Stage Door Canteen in Hollywood (immortalized in a Dane Clark film bearing the same name) and like Clark’s “buddy Bob Hutton, have a romance with Joan Leslie, a star I fell hopelessly in love with while watching *Sergeant York*” (62). Much like her same-sex attraction to Turner and Gardner, her desire for Leslie is figured both as a cinematic fantasy (via Bob Hutton’s character in *Sergeant York*) and as a remnant of a time bygone (both the moment she watched the film in her youth and the time when the film itself was produced). More importantly, it is framed as a memory *of* and *about* cinema. Myra’s sexual indeterminacy, which the novel documents in spades with her courting of all-American male Rusty and her infatuation with all-American girl Mary-Ann, is presented as intimately tied to her film fandom.

Furthermore, we find in *Marriage is a Private Affair* an example of Hollywood’s claim to molding and dictating public discourse, not unlike the way Vidal’s Caroline

hoped the medium would one day. Termed mere “celluloid brassiere” (*Selected Letters* 457) by Tennessee Williams who worked on an early treatment of the film (during the MGM contract where he drafted the treatment that would become *The Glass Menagerie*), *Marriage is a Private Affair* stars Lana Turner as a woman dissatisfied with her impulsive marriage to an Air Corps Lieutenant and her new role as a mother. Its plot incorporated Turner’s own elopement, pregnancy, and divorce which had kept her out of films for the years leading up to its release. Despite its title, and epitomizing instead the way Hollywood studio intertwined the political with the personal, *Marriage is a Private Affair* locates the construct of “marriage” and gender normativity as a necessarily public affair — one to be gawked at at the movies and in fan magazines. A striking example of Hollywood’s increasingly jingoistic agenda,<sup>10</sup> *Marriage is a Private Affair* is set within the defense industry during the war. Safekeeping both the nation and its nuclear family unit, the film also signals what becomes the central motivating factor of Myra’s existence. Myra sees the forties as “the last moment in human history when it was possible to possess a total commitment to something outside oneself. I mean of course the war and the necessary elimination of Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo” (62). The film locates Turner’s domestic and seemingly trivial tribulations within the framework of wartime life, creating in Myra’s words an American male who could be bred to believe in American exceptionalism:

In the Forties, American boys created a world empire because they chose to be James Stewart, Clark Gable and William Eythe. By imitating godlike autonomous men, our boys were able to defeat Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo. Could we do it again? Are the private eyes and denatured cowboys potent enough to serve as imperial exemplars? (40)

Myra aches for godlike autonomous men like Rhett Butler (Gable in Civil War-set *Gone with the Wind* [1939]), Martin Breitner (Stewart in World War II-set *The Mortal Storm* [1940]), and Ensign Hallam Scott (Eythe in post-Pearl Harbor navy film *Wing and a Prayer* [1944]). It is in these pronouncements that Myra's film fandom escapes the confines of mere lighthearted comedy and undertakes instead a more perversely serious endeavor.

Myra attends "films *seriously*" (90) and it is in that hyperbolic tone that the novel stages its most perverse episode. Under the pretense of an increasingly depraved physical examination, Myra takes it upon herself to possess Rusty and thus bring the "American male" under her control. After taking his measurements (height, weight) and medical history, she ties him up to an examination table and sodomizes him with a dildo. This, she tells us, is the culmination of Myron's fantasies which she sees herself finally accomplishing in ways Myron could never have dreamed of. After Rusty leaves, Myra notes that she "must write it all down. Exactly as it happened. While it is fresh in [her] memory... But my hand trembles," she continues,

Why? Twice I've dropped the yellow ball-point pen. Now I sit at the surgical table, making the greatest effort to calm myself, to put it all down not only for its own sake but for you, Randolph, who never dreamed that anyone could ever act out *totally* his fantasies and survive. (166).

Here Myra resorts to the dual promise of cinema, both its ability to record everything "exactly as it happened" and its status as the repository of people's dreams and fantasies. This fantasy — to physically and psychologically humiliate the American male — is described in clinical language for Myra's imagined audience, Dr. Randolph Montag,

Myron's erstwhile psychiatrist and dentist. Dr. Montag is invoked as the voice of authority that will both corroborate and authenticate Myra's own experience. These sentences, which lead to Myra's abuse of Rusty, are the lines that open Michael Sarne's film adaptation of Vidal's novel. Only, instead of helping frame Myra's account of Rusty's rape, they are presented in the film as Myron's hand-written notes before he undergoes gender reassignment surgery in an operation room flanked by an eager audience on one side, and klieg lights and a whip-wielding nurse on the other. The scene, shot mostly in canted angles and through the metallic reflective surfaces that double as walls of this sci-fi looking hospital wing, stress the absurdity of the film that is to follow. In both cases, Vidal and Sarne frame Myra's climactic moments as thoroughly performative within a cinematic framework. But while Myra's diary becomes a parody of the *nouveau-roman*<sup>11</sup> in its attempts to erase all taint of the "treachery and inadequacy of words" (8), Sarne's film aims instead for an over-the-top collage of Hollywood in-jokes and references that explicitly re-centers the film around Myron (Rex Reed who is seen and heard solely by Myra throughout the film, an immaterial ghost of genders past) and his Hollywood obsession.

Despite its tepid reception and Vidal's own disdain for it (oddly enough, he used the same language his critics used to dismiss his novel, calling it an "awful joke" [*Conversations* 71]), the Raquel Welch-starring film adaptation offers an apt example of how Vidal's character is a queer movie fan. From its first scene, *Myra Breckinridge* the film presents itself as a film for and about queer movie fans. We follow Myron's surgery with a credit sequence that depends on film fandom. Once Myron, still

awake, braces himself for losing his member (“You realize once we cut it off it won’t grow back,” he’s told), the film cuts to a scene from Shirley Temple’s 1936 film *Stowaway*. The film features Temple as Barbara “Ching-Ching” Stewart, a young orphan living in Sanchow, China who becomes a stowaway on a rich playboy’s ship sailing around the world. The transition from Myron’s surgery (already marked as a performance by its mise-en-scène with an audience and numerous lights) to Temple’s black and white film is jarring. It anticipates what becomes an integral part of the film, its use of clips from past Twentieth Century Fox films. After being asked by a Chinese man during a talent contest whether she knows any American songs, we see Temple singing “You Gotta S-M-I-L-E to be H-A-Double-P-Y.” The song is the soundtrack for Sarne’s film’s credit sequence which features Myra (Raquel Welch in a white dress and a sun-hat) and Myron (*New York Daily News* film critic Rex Reed in a white suit) dancing around the Hollywood Walk of Fame while the credits appear as autographs scrawled on screen, as if the audience had been clamoring for them. Temple’s song in *Stowaway* is in itself a song *about* fandom. After finishing the first verse she tells her audience that “just for fun I’d like to sing this song again, the way it would be done, by... Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, and last but not least that swingable pair: Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.” Just as the first scene presents Myron’s gender reassignment surgery as a performance, Temple’s song, itself a performance for a crowd, becomes a ventriloquist spectacle: in a brief snippet towards the end of the credits, we see Temple using a dummy to play Fred Astaire to her Ginger Rogers, giving us one of many instances where the film clips elucidate something about *Myra Breckinridge* while recontextualizing whatever earlier film it is citing. Myron

and Myra, who dance their way around the Hollywood Walk of Fame like a less talented Fred and Ginger, get visually equated with a precocious child and her dummy. Which is which becomes the implicit question for the rest of the film, one not easily resolved as at times Myra is in command while at others it seems she's merely doing Myron's bidding.

If cinema and gender performance are at the center of these initial scenes, they are further underscored by the first voice-over we hear from Myra herself. Echoing the exact first lines of Vidal's novel, Welch intones "I am Myra Breckinridge whom no man will ever possess." Sarne's film pairs this with a brief clip from *One Million Years, B.C.* (1966) where we see Raquel Welch in her iconic animal skin bikini. This insertion is meant to disorient and instruct viewers: Welch's Myra is *just* a character, one wholly wedded to the silver screen and to the sexual(ized) persona that Welch had been mining in films such as *One Million Years, B.C.* This clip dismantles the star system even as it depends on it, not unlike Vidal's Myra who resembles Fay Wray. In casting Welch and offering viewers an image of her from a different film, the filmmakers present audiences with Myra as always already a cinematic creation, one whose existence can call upon both Shirley Temple films from the 1930s (she's shown to be in diegetic control of these clips throughout) as well as the image of a bona fide movie star like Welch herself.

These early scenes, wholly original to the film, are wedded to the concerns we have been tracing in Vidal's novel. Casting Welch and Reed stresses the doubling of Myra/Myron as a star-gazing fan and a film critic. The Temple soundtrack and the *One Million Years, B.C.* clip locate the film both as a part of, and as indebted to, American

movies. Welch is put on the same register not only as Shirley Temple but Veronica Lake and Ann Miller (the two stars on the Walk of Fame which the camera pauses on during the credits) as well as Mae West who co-stars in the film but who gets first billing, part of a series of increasingly ridiculous contract requirements which Sarne, Welch and Reed would later assert thoroughly undid the production. Welch's image exists both within the film and outside of it; she is both star and character. Within its first five minutes, *Myra Breckinridge*, establishes itself as "a movie made with a film fan in mind" (Campbell 5-6). Those with knowledge of Temple, West and Welch are better able to contextualize those first moments which offer us Myra's vision of "the world viewed" as one always already screened, and those who cannot place the Temple film or may not know Welch, West or Lake from their earlier credits, get treated to a queered version of Hollywood history where "You Gotta S-M-I-L-E to be H-A-Double-P-Y" becomes the backdrop for a film about a trans-woman and where images of Laurel and Hardy become euphemistic of sexual encounters.

The film clips perform the kind of claiming and repurposing that characterizes a decidedly queer film fandom. For example, when a shot from *Stowaway* featuring Temple getting drenched by milk was going to be used in the film leading to all kinds of unsavory connotations given the sexual frame of the film, Temple (then a Nixon appointed UN General Assembly representative) contacted the studio to remove said scene. Other films and stars were not so spared. As Diffrient points out in his essay on the film, Sarne's decision to use these archival clips resulted in a "type of textual density, suggesting not only that the main character — a film critic — was living with these images but also that



an alternative history of Hollywood could be and indeed would be written once gay subtexts and camp sensibilities were lifted to the surface, something eventually accomplished by Vito Russo in his 1981 book *The Celluloid Closet* and in the writings of queer theorists like Alexander Doty and B. Ruby Rich” (57). Indeed, Myra Breckinridge is the anticipatory embodiment of the project Rich envisioned in the inaugural issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, of exhuming memories like that shared by Derek Jarman who remembered how much Italian cinema meant to him as a “young faggot.”

The scene that makes the best use of this collaging technique, and one which will help us put into relief Myra’s queer film fandom, is the physical examination scene: having lured Rusty to the academy’s infirmary, Myra strips him and then straps him to an examination table. As his fear becomes all-too evident, Myra disrobes, revealing a star-spangled swimsuit. She straps on a dildo (off-frame) and tells Rusty that “You have a lot to learn. *All* you men have a lot to learn. And I have taken it upon myself to teach you!” The lesson, she tells him, will involve her “balling him.” In this the film follows the novel quite faithfully. The difference lies in the film’s decision to defamiliarize the scene with intercut clips from other films. Vidal’s Myra aims to “write it all down...exactly as it happened”: she tells us that, after testing him with a thermometer and unfazed by his horror (“Jesus, you’ll split me!” [194]) she “pushed even harder into him, triggering the prostate gland, for when I felt between his legs, I discovered that the erection he had not been able to present me with had now, inadvertently occurred” (195). Her language is clinical, attempting to present the scene in an objective way, even if her flamboyant prose

cannot help but allow itself a flourish or two (“It was a delicious sight, that slender muscular body stretched full length as sacrifice to some cruel goddess” [171]). When Dr. Montag reads Myra’s notebook, he’s aghast at what it describes, initially casting doubt on the veracity of Myra’s claims: “Am I to understand all this really happened?” he asks Myra,

“Exactly,” I said. “At least you’ll have to agree that I’ve got him down in black and white, once and for all, every detail, every hair, every pimple.”

“You’ve got his *outside*, yes.” Judiciously, he arranged a screen of smoke between us. “But that’s just Rusty’s skin, you haven’t shown the inside.”

“I haven’t shown his inside, dear Randolph, because I don’t know it. And, if I may say so, it is presumptuous for anyone to even pretend he can know what another person’s interior is really like, short of an autopsy. The only thing we can ever know for certain is skin, and I now know him better than he does himself.”

“Possibly. Possibly.” Randolph still appeared distressed.

“In fact,” I improvised, “nothing matters except what is visible to the eye. For me to write, as I shall when you go, that you *looked* distressed at this moment could very easily be a projection on my part, and misreading of your mood. To be accurate, I should simply write that while you were reading my notes there was a double crease between your brows, which is not usual since...” (213)

Dr. Montag interrupts Myra’s train of thought, but it is still enough to illuminate Myra’s overall concerns when it comes to her desire to capture accurately what she did to Rusty. For Myra, the way to resolve the “problem set us by the French New Novelists” (“Is it possible to describe anything accurately?”) (143) is to only write about images (“nothing matters except what is visible to the eye”). Myra’s vision of the world is tempered by cinema. This is why, having described what she did to Rusty, she can safely say that she

has him down “in black and white,” echoing the pervasive and long-held principle in the late 1960s “that black-and-white [cinematography] connoted serious gritty reality” (Harris 219). Even in describing something “accurately,” Myra cannot help but resort to the conventions of Hollywood cinema. What is “real” for Myra is instinctively a version of what is found in “reels.”

In the film, the infirmary is adorned with black and white pictures of Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, Clark Gable and other Hollywood studio stars that look over Rusty’s physical examination. Sarne constantly shoots these pictures in close ups, presenting these stars as physically present — another version of the audience we saw witnessing Myron’s operation in the opening scene of the film. Indeed, the scene’s opening soundtrack sets up what follows as a performance, with a rodeo announcer yelling, “And now ladies and gentlemen, what you’ve all been waiting for!” before offering us a young Judy Garland telling the rodeo crowd, “I reckon none of you Northern folk ever heard of Texas Callahan makin’ love to his gal! Well, you’re gonna hear it now!” followed by a “charge!” trumpet as we see Welch dressed in medieval armor, holding a lance and crying, “Chaaarge!” Immediately, the film positions this scene as one where sexual activity will be euphemistically presented through cinematic images. More tellingly, the scene depends quite explicitly on the figure of the knowing spectator, the fan. Sarne not only intercuts film clips into Myra’s barbaric act, but then shoots the actors against a black backdrop, stripping the scene of any realism and framing it instead as a mock cinematic spectacle. Thus, while we see clips from various shots that stand in for Rusty’s rape (a damn breaking, a missile being launched, a nuclear bomb going off)

Sarne cuts to a shot of Myron in an empty movie theater eating popcorn, presumably watching on the big screen the scene taking place at the Academy's infirmary.

Thus, by the time we get to the climactic moment of the scene, rather than give us the image of Myra riding Rusty, Sarne gives us Welch dressed in a prairie dress on a swing, crying "I'm coming, Scarlett! I'm coming, Lana! Hooray for Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck! Uncle Sam, here I cooome!" Not only are we given dialogue that connects cinema fandom with queer sex, but it presents this scene in keeping with the most strident image of the fan, a figure "consistently characterized (referencing the term's origins) as a potential fanatic. This means that fandom is seen as excessive, bordering on deranged, behavior" (Jenson 9). In both novel and book, this scene — the apex of Myra's deranged behavior — codes her fandom in tandem with her transgressive and queer vision of sexuality. By invoking *Gone With the Wind's* Scarlett O'Hara, Lana Turner (of *Marriage is a Private Affair*) as well as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, Myra crucially connects Hollywood history with her possession of Rusty's body. Myra places the fan, usually an outsider whose fanaticism (that in-depth knowledge, the unfettered enthusiasm, the desire to emulate and inhabit the cinema she consumes) is derided by those wishing to uphold certain values — "the rational over the emotional, the educated over the uneducated, the subdued over the passionate, the elite over the popular, the mainstream over the margin, the status quo over the alternative" (Jenson 24-5), at the center of a sexual revolution. In penetrating Rusty, Myra "breaches both the physical body of Rusty and the border between filmed and intercut reality" (Campbell 60). This is precisely where Myra's transgressive film fandom lies. By being cinema incarnate, she is able to breach the

barrier between what's on screen and what's in front of it; she is both audience and actor, critic and fan.

Myra's fandom allows her to accomplish what Williams wanted as a child, to enter the screen and join the action. This "action" is presented as a necessarily sexual one. If we are to follow Samantha Barbas' statement that the "story of film fandom, in large part, is the story of the way that fans refused to accept mass culture passively and, instead, became actively involved in their entertainment" (4) — and here she is referring to activities like fan fiction (using fan knowledge to diegetically control the action) and memorabilia collection (wanting to own and amass materials that introduce your desired object into your room), Myra understands it in a sexual way. Not only does she insert herself into a boy who is a "throwback to the stars of the Forties" (149) and who reminds her of James Craig "in the fourth reel of *Marriage is a Private Affair*" (150) but she does so in order, bizarrely for sure, to "destroy the vestigial traces of traditional manhood in the race in order to realign the sexes" (42). This hyperbolic rhetoric is what makes Myra (and Vidal's intentions in writing her) so hard to pin down: is she queer negativity prefigured or is she spouting mere retrograde understandings of gender? Vidal, a consummate satirist makes answering that question even harder, for rather than letting his protagonist run wild and succeed, he destroys her, offering a vision of a future that seems just as jarring to a neoconservative as it would to a radical queer.

Both the novel and the film end with Myra being contained. In the novel, Myra's accident leaves her in critical condition and once she comes to terms with her new de-

sexed body (“Where are my breasts? *Where are my breasts?*” [273]) we are offered a final chapter in the voice of Myron who, years after the events in the novel, finds Myra’s diary. Myron tells us he married Mary Ann and is now living “a happy and normal life, raising dogs and working for Planned Parenthood” (276). He distances himself from the person who wrote these “demented pages” (273), again stressing the deranged behavior we are to concede, has no place in the California suburbs. With its blissful image of American suburbia and rhetoric of normality, this final chapter frames not only Myron’s stint as Myra but his youth as a New York City fag as developmental phases that, as a mature, happily “normal” married man, he is able to dissociate from. While Myra’s prose bristles with cinema references and hyperbolic statements, Myron’s is full of platitudes: “Happiness, like the proverbial bluebird, is to be found in your own backyard if you just know where to look,” he intones at the end of the novel (277). What is also missing in these pages is any mention of the movies. Fan knowledge of cinema becomes emblematic of Myra’s recovery; her ability to list every film Edith Head worked on is the first instance where she feels the consequences of her accident are not as dire as she once thought. All of this disappears in that last chapter. We are treated instead to a picture of domestic bliss, which would lead us to argue that Myra has been tamed by a heteronormative (and reproductive) ethos had Vidal not made happily married Myron a Planned Parenthood employee. They may embody the type of domesticity Myra abhors, but Myron and Mary Ann nevertheless continue Myra’s project of curbing the overpopulation of the United States.

In the film, on the other hand, Sarne stages her demise in less uncertain terms. While we see Myra happily exiting a building, knowing she has finally won her fair share of the inheritance (a feat she accomplishes by finally letting it be known she is Myron after all), we see Myron driving a car while in voice-over we hear him addressing Myra: “You got ambitious! You were great in Cinemascope and Technicolor, but you can’t cut it in black and white.” Again the vocabulary of the conventions of cinematic realism (“black and white”) portray Myra as a fantastical character who exists in Technicolored Hollywood dreams. We then see Myron run her over. This is the only moment in the film where Myron is presented as being able to manipulate the material world that Myra inhabits. Just as with the rape scene, film clips stylize the violence of the accident while framing it again as a performance. As Myra flies over the car in a physics-defying moment of Hollywood stunt-work, we see Claudette Colbert dying in the arms of a lover in a sepia-toned film of the 1930s. We then find Myron lying on the street as if he’d been the one run over before Sarne cuts to a black and white scene in a hospital (“Where are my tits? Where are my tits?”) where we learn Myron has dreamt everything we just witnessed, something the film stresses even further by having a copy of the *Time* cover featuring Raquel Welch herself sitting next to Myron’s hospital bed and having Farrah Fawcett (who played Mary Ann) play his nurse. The ending, which quite explicitly echoes the ending of the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* (“And you were there! And you were there!”), frames the entire film as a fantasy, one fueled and made up of the movies. In his 1970 pictorial essay on the film for *Playboy* Reed stresses that this ending was part of his contract. As he candidly writes, “I knew I was likely to be murdered when the

reviews came out, so I wouldn't agree to do the movie unless the studio let me approve my part of the script before filming. Under no circumstances was I interested in playing a homosexual who has an operation to make him into a woman." In his mind, the film would forgo the sex-change (even as the film kept the opening scene that hints at one intact) and instead present the plot as Myron's own post-accident dream, where "he was the alter ego of Myra Breckinridge, giving advice to her. The two of them would be living together at Château Marmont and there would be lots of sex between them; I'd be a sort of carnal Jiminy Cricket to Raquel's erotic Pinocchio. I didn't object too strenuously to that," Rex confesses ("Myra Goes Hollywood"). Reed saw the film as a Walter Mitty-type scenario where it was all fantasy, all movie magic, though his reference to Jiminy Cricket and Pinocchio nicely dovetails with Vidal's creation in the way it marries a sexual desire with a moral imperative. That this analogy depends on the mythic Disneyfied version of Pinocchio further enhances the way Reed's own persona trafficked in the type of queering that Sarne's film indulges throughout. This explains why the film's containment of its outrageous protagonist feels so artificial, yet the question remains: why, in novel as in film, must Myra be contained?

I would like to suggest that the transgressive bite of Myra's fandom, couched as it is in a utopian, queer sexual revolution, is precisely why she is mockingly contained by the heteronormative marriage to Mary Ann in the novel and by the very process of movie-making magic in the film. This is what makes Myra both a laughable protagonist worthy of infamy as well as a test-case for the potentiality of queer fandom as a political agenda. The queer film fan, whose backward glance enacts a future vision, is here



epitomized by Myra's (and Sarne's) ability to plunder and look back at the films of the Forties in order to imagine a queer future. Indeed, Myra's insights are nothing new. Those "obvious things" Vidal opens *Screening History* with are just as passé in 1968 when Myra pronounced them: she in turn had to look back at Tyler's 1947 book to nurture them. Yet it is the forward-thinking aspect of Myra's crazed agenda that strikes me as wholly queer, especially as it depends, as we have seen, on a foundational childhood memory, not unlike those shared by D.A. Miller in his own study of gay male childish fantasies of Broadway fandom, a fascination he codes as necessarily existing outside of the realm of recognition and identification. Many proto-queer boys felt addressed by Broadway in the ways Miller suggests. The Broadway musical, he notes, "hailed us as directly as if it had been calling out our names, and met us so well that in finding ourselves called for, we seemed to find ourselves, period" (65). Here again is another model of gay male engagement with mass culture that depends on the seeming paradox of feeling recognized by one's very absence yet feeling called by the form's very existence. Muñoz's description of Baldwin "simultaneously positioning himself within and outside the image of the movie star" (18), Kael's assertion that movie fans know more about "how and why the movie has been made than is consistent with theatrical illusion" (65) are various ways of describing the queer film fandom that we find in Vidal's character, what in talking about Manuel Puig, Suzanne Jill Levine will describe as a "(com)passionate (ir)reverence for movies" (587). What in Kael is merely a way of life (the *only* way of life, Sontag would add in "The Decay of Cinema") and in Muñoz is a survival strategy is, in Vidal, a calculating and threatening force. Myra exceeds the confines of the book that contains her

(in its subsequent film adaptation, in its eventual novelized sequel) and escapes even her own creator (see Howard Austen and Beverly Pepper's cheekily named *The Myra Breckinridge Cookbook* [1970]).

If Myra is a satirical figure it is because what she represents is a vision of queer desire both mediated by and instantiated by cinema. Her queer film fandom is but one facet of her transgressive behavior and challenging allure, yet if she is to be understood as “the almost perfect foreshadowing of the Gay Rights moment” (Eisner 256) it is not only because she enacts “an effort to thrust queer desire into the center of American politics” but because she in turn anticipates the queens who fought back at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, whose anger against the police who raided the bar on the night of June 28 1969 was fueled and further exacerbated by their sadness over Judy Garland's passing. Only a year after *Myra Breckinridge* was published, the love that Judy Garland inspired in drag queens and gay men in New York City (a circuit Myron would have undoubtedly been familiar with), incited a very real revolution at the hands of those disenfranchised by the heteronormative constructs that Vidal's heroine was battling. The raid on Stonewall in this sense, can be reframed as an affront to the publicness and visibility of queer subjects, and as the battle cry of queer film fans who saw themselves within and outside the image of Judy Garland, a star many have since hoped to resemble left three quarter profile if the key light is no more than five feet high during the close shot.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This move anticipated the eventual critical lashing against the novel. Once they were out, reviews were unsurprisingly unkind, variously calling *Myra Breckinridge* a “put-on, a sexual game” (Zimmerman 71), “evidence of some kind of aberration” (Boatwright 20), and “a rather damp fizzle” (Moon 93).

<sup>2</sup> “Myra IS sexuality in Big Bright Walking Talking Neon Lights” (19), argues John Mitzel in one of the first sustained readings of the novel; looking at the queer sixties, Douglas Eisner finds that *Myra Breckinridge* “represents the almost perfect foreshadowing of the Gay Rights moment — an effort to thrust queer desire into the center of American politics — arguing that sexuality is as much about power as it is about personal expression” (256).

<sup>3</sup> This hyperbolic statement is present throughout Tyler's work. In the preface to *Magic and Myth of the Movies* he proposes his work sit alongside that of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), blending as it does the way myth has trickled down into the world of Hollywood filmmaking. When Myra spouses the belief that she and Uncle Buck “deal in myths” noting that “At any given moment the world requires one full-bodied blonde Aphrodite (Jean Harlow), one dark siren of flawless beauty (Hedy Lamarr)” (126), she is merely echoing Tyler himself who sees “the gods and goddesses of Hollywood” as “modern vestiges of the old Greek divinities” (xxvi).

<sup>4</sup> Baldwin finds in Bette Davis infamous eyes precisely this moment of recognition, for other than the way she walks, it was Davis's eyes which were all too familiar to Baldwin, especially as his *own* popping eyes which earned him so much abuse from his father. As he tells us, “it was not my father's hatred of *my* frog-eyes which hurt me, this hatred proving, in time, to be rather more resounding than real: I have my mother's eyes. When my father called me ugly, he was not attacking me so much as he was attacking my mother” (6-7).

<sup>5</sup> What draws Muñoz to Derrida's discussion of hauntology is its ability to surpass the binary between ideality and actuality which is readily demonstrated by the domain of techno-media (“and therefore the public or political domain” [qtd. in Muñoz 43]). The domain of “techno-media” that Derrida cites when describing the logic of ghosts in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994) encompasses, for Muñoz, “broadcast, video graphic, and cybernetic communication” (43).

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<sup>6</sup> *Hollywood* continues Vidal's project of tracing United States's history as part of what he calls his 'Narratives of Empire.' In order of historical chronology, they consist of: *Burr* (1973), *Lincoln* (1984), *1876* (1976), *Empire* (1987), *Hollywood* (1990), *Washington D.C.* (1967), *The Golden Age* (2000). Starting (chronologically) with Aaron Burr, Vidal's seven novels mix fictional characters with historical figures and follow Burr's heirs through the span of American history from Independence through to the Cold War. Taken together, these novels map a narrative from print culture to cinema, beginning as they do with the Sanford family's newspaper business which makes way (via Caroline) into the filmmaking industry.

<sup>7</sup> See in particular Mark Harris's book *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (2014) which chronicles the war-time work of John Ford, George Stevens, William Wyler, John Huston, Frank Capra, all of which were conscripted to write, shoot, and produce newsreels and propaganda films throughout the US involvement in the second world war. Seeing as, by 1940, 60 million Americans — "more than half of the adult population of the United States — went to the movie theaters every week" (46), it's no surprise the War Department deployed the most successful film directors, editors, and cinematographers of the time to sell the war across the country. As a memo from the head of Warner Bros' publicity department explicitly points out, "we consider our whole Warner Bros. setup as another agency of the government... We all want to do more than our share to win this fight" (140-141). This impetus, as Harris stresses, came from the US government seeing the work that Goebbels was doing in Germany and knowing that the war would have to be won in the court of public opinion before it could be won abroad.

<sup>8</sup> Despite calling herself a "New Woman," it isn't very clear that Myra knows what she means by this. Later in the novel, for example, she notes that "once I have completed my seduction, I shall be free of all guilt toward Myron and for Myron. I shall be a new woman, literally new, something unique under the sun" (215) yet when Randolph presses her to explain what that entails, she confesses that "I have no clear idea as to my ultimate identity... All that I do know is that I shall be freed of obsession and, in this at least, be like no one else who ever lived" (216). Thus, while trying to tie Myra's rhetoric to a particular brand of identity politics (as Douglas Eisner points out, Vidal saw all of that as "ridiculous" [268]), we might agree with Kate Bornstein who points out the radicalism of Vidal's point in Myra: "that the existence of transgendered people — people who exist sexually for pleasure, and not procreation — strikes terror at the heart of our puritanical Eurocentric culture" (239)

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<sup>9</sup> When asked to name his favorite movie in an interview in 1976, Vidal replied that it was “*Marriage is a Private Affair* with Lana Turner written by Tennessee Williams from the '40's. Myra Breckenridge admired it tremendously” (Brown & Van Vooren) not only blurring yet again the line between Myra and himself, but also attributing the film to his friend Williams. As noted in Chapter 1, Tennessee Williams worked briefly on the treatment for *Marriage is a Private Affair* and it was during this MGM contract that he came to write the first draft of “The Gentleman Caller,” a play that eventually became *The Glass Menagerie*. He was let go of the project for, as he put it, giving Ms Turner “too many multisyllabic words” (In Pandro Berman, then Turner’s boyfriend, “Lana can tackle two syllables, but I’m afraid if you go into three you’re taxing her vocabulary!”) (Rader).

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed study on the jingoism of early 1940s film, see Mark Harris’s *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War*, which follows the careers of John Ford, John Huston, George Stevens, William Wyler and Frank Capra, as they were conscripted to produce propaganda during the war.

<sup>11</sup> In 1967, Vidal published an essay title “French Letters: Theories of the New Novel” where he discusses the “portentous theorizings of the New Novelists” (110). Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute (the central examples of the essay), whom he calls “pseudo-scientists” (99) for their appropriation of scientific rhetoric (if not rigor) he says despite various experiments, “did not make a ‘new’ novel” (107). “Perhaps the most naïve aspect of Robbe-Grillet’s theory of fiction,” he argues, “is his assumption that words can ever describe with absolute precision anything. At no point does he acknowledge that words are simply fiat for real things; by their nature, words are imprecise and layered with meanings — the signs of things, not the things themselves” (106). Fittingly, he notes that “no existing language will be of any use to him, unless it be that of the Troibrand Islanders: those happy people have no words for ‘why’ or ‘because’; for them, things just happen” (106), the very image that opens *Myra Breckinridge*.

## CHAPTER THREE

Cruising & Screening John; Queer Politics in the Documentary Form of Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw*

“As *Naked Lunch* is to lit hipsters, *City of Night* is to successive generations of young fags and dykes bored with Andrew Holleran” (Lafreniere 118). Flippant as this introductory remark may be, it nevertheless points to the way John Rechy has carefully constructed an outlaw persona that both defines and helps market his fiction. Rechy is at the margin of an already established fringe, that of late twentieth century gay literature. Fittingly then, for its November 2010 issue, *VICE* magazine had Terry Richardson shoot the accompanying portraits that illustrate Lafreniere’s feature on the gay Chicano writer. Yet, while the Richardson portraits are in keeping with the infamous photographer’s style<sup>1</sup> (spontaneous portraits shot candidly aiming for a polaroid feel), they eschew one of Richardson’s signature characteristics. Rather than being shot against a white background as he does when celebrities and models visit his studio in New York, Richardson shot Rechy in the writer’s own home in Los Angeles. The shots portray Rechy in casual gear (white tee, blue sweatshirt, leather jacket, grey sweatpants), suggesting the rugged allure of this hustler-cum-writer, more at ease with his weathered features than the extolling narcissist he so obsessively embodied in his early novels. Yet, it is the blown-up black and white glamor shots of Greta Garbo and Rita Hayworth that serve as backdrops to these shots that arrest the viewer’s attention. In one, while Rechy’s pursed lips make him looking haggard and tired, a similar expression in the giant close-up of a youthful,

lipsticked Garbo (hands clutching an expensive coat around her neck, an art deco ring visible in the corner of the picture) finds the Swedish movie star looking characteristically aloof and alluring. In another, Rechy's smile is dwarfed by a large portrait of Garbo, hair casually obscuring half her face, curled eyelashes framing a bemused and distracted gaze fixed somewhere above where Rechy stands.

The contrast between Rechy — known for the lurid tales of the American homosexual underground — and Garbo — known for her icy glamor — would seemingly be the point of these portraits. Indeed, the juxtapositions (masculine/feminine, casual/glamor, color/black and white) which exponentially multiply the more you stare at the pictures, become more fascinating for the way Rechy has used these types of contrasts to define what he calls the “outlaw sensibility” that marks his work, and which defines for him so much of the art produced by homosexual artists. Discussing the two writers covered in previous chapters and pointing how they exemplify this sensibility, Rechy notes that Tennessee Williams straddles the line between “Repression and liberation,” epitomized by his “whore and poet” Blanche DuBois (*The Sexual Outlaw* 194), and argues that “Gore Vidal’s cool intellect allows a tone of ‘trashy dishing’ that’s right out of gay bars” (“The Outlaw Sensibility” 155). These marked and at times competing dualities are rooted in the sensitivity and strength, which, in Rechy’s view, homosexuals develop in order to survive in a heterosexual world. In this context, the hustler and the movie star, brought together in Richardson’s portraits, function less as necessary foils but as complementary figures. It is no surprise that the “masterpiece of the outlaw sensibility” (154) isn’t one of the many queer writers Rechy discusses, but Marilyn

Monroe, who in her posthumous deification was able to “infiltrate the world she could not enter in life” (154). His fascination with Marilyn<sup>2</sup>, he has explained, comes out of the fact that as a gay Chicano, he’s had to remake himself constantly; his Johnny Rio persona which he honed both on the page (in *City of Night* [1963] and *Numbers* [1967]) and in his cruising life, is an elaborate creation not unlike that of Norma Jean Baker.

More tellingly, these Richardson portraits of Rechy with Garbo hovering over him are of interest less for their exceptionality than for their familiarity. In 1978, for example, for a photo shoot with Tony Korody that’s become iconic in its ubiquity whenever Rechy is featured in the press, the writer posed sitting in front of his typewriter flanked by these blown-up pictures of Garbo. The image recurred again in a 2003 piece in the *Lambda Book Report* where an older Rechy posed in the same room with no typewriter to be found though the furnishings — down to the rug — remained the same. The recurring image of the writer being looked down on by these Hollywood stars speaks to Rechy’s own continued fascination with old Hollywood. Much like Williams and Vidal before him, young John (born Juan Francisco in 1934 to a Mexican family in El Paso) grew up enjoying “those books with their splashes of Technicolor prose” (*About My Life* 92) while attending movie theaters religiously and preferring “movies that even then” he says in his autobiography, “had become ‘old’” (4).

I open with these portraits because they bring together cinema and Rechy in ways that will be crucial for this chapter. Just as the Garbo images have remained background intertexts for Rechy’s image for decades, underscoring his fascination with Hollywood,



this chapter excavates Rechy's queer film fandom, finding his outlaw sensibility inextricably tied to those early years spent sneaking in for free into the Texas Grand Theater by the exit door to enjoy the movies shown during Revival Week. Those movies would engender in him not only an ongoing admiration for figures like Garbo and Monroe but a continued palpable inspiration in his own writings. His first forays into writing were, in fact, "loose retellings — this allowed me to think of them as 'original,'" he confesses, "of movies I had seen" (Rechy *About My Life* 52). Not only do the tightly controlled images of authentic artifice that movie stars like Garbo and Monroe represent sit quite comfortably with the macho posturing Rechy's protagonists extoll in his novels, but Rechy aimed to actively participate and create the screened world he so coveted as a young Chicano gay boy in El Paso. This reworking of films as "original" stories is easily recognizable to a 2014 audience as a fan activity, one which entails wanting to be an active spectator that refuses to leave the stars and films squarely behind the doors of the Texas Grand Theater and instead encourages an active exchange that by definition exceeds the confines of theaters and screens.

As an avid hustler and cruiser, Rechy later found other ways of being an "active spectator" in movie theaters. This is precisely what he comes to represent and theorize in his sixth novel, *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* (1977): when his protagonist arrives at a movie theater in the middle of the afternoon, he notes there's a large group of hunters in the back "who have come to make it, not to see the cheap movie" (235). This sexualized active spectatorship is the ongoing conceit of Rechy's novel, one which adds an extra layer of spectatorship with its importation of documentary film rhetoric. This

confluence of fandom, cruising, and documentary filmmaking is the central concern of this chapter, especially as it is through the interplay of these varying active spectatorships that Rechy mounts a political project that depends on the easily blurred boundaries between observation and participation, visibility and invisibility. By bringing into play the engaged spectator of documentary films, the aroused spectator of cruising venues, and the knowing fan spectator of Hollywood films, Rechy creates in *The Sexual Outlaw* a text that encourages in its readers the very slide from observation to participation, which all these active spectatorships depend on.

While *The Sexual Outlaw*'s choice of blending nonfiction with fiction seems particularly ripe for analysis in light of the gay press of the 1970s' desire to influence "the direction of gay fiction and to defend the genre's continued relevance in a world where the 'openness' of nonfiction seemed newly possible" (Distelberg 402),<sup>3</sup> Rechy's desire to align his nonfiction<sup>4</sup> with an overtly cinematic aesthetic demands a different approach. I want to first identify the ways Rechy's text constructs itself *as* a documentary before pitting it against the landmark gay documentary *Word is Out* (1977) to examine how anomalous yet prescient Rechy's vigorous appeal for sexual revolution were in the context of a post-Stonewall consciousness. This allows me to reframe a conversation around Rechy's text that tackles his stylistic choice to embed into his text a cinematic sensibility within a socio-cultural environment which invited solely positive portrayals of homosexuals on screen and which the text's form invokes and mocks at the same time. That this all gets thematized in the text itself will help question both the heretofore tacit understanding of Rechy as merely a documentarian as well as the early post-Stonewall

impetus towards visibility and assimilation which Rechy's text actively works against. If, as Barbara Foley argues, a documentary novel is a "distinct fictional kind" of novel that "purports to represent reality by means of agreed-upon convention of fictionality, while grafting onto its fictive pact some kind of additional claim to empirical validation," (25) Rechy's text achieves this claim by appealing directly to the indexical nature of filmmaking in general and the more particular truth-telling assumption that frames filmed documentaries.

Beginning with the best-selling novel *City of Night*, John Rechy's texts have traditionally been treated both as documents and documentaries. The early reviews of Rechy's first novel gave the author faint praise. They noted that *City of Night* "should be regarded more as sociology than as a novel" (Buitenhuis 168), offering as it did nothing more than a "blow by blow account, so to speak, of where to go for what you want (assuming of course that you want it) — a kind of 'Sodom on Five Dollars a Day'" (Chester 6).<sup>5</sup> From then on, Rechy has often been discussed in terms that have restricted his work "to the level of 'reporting'" (Giles 369). Along these lines then, *City of Night* has been variously seen as faithfully representing the "gay world," (Hoffman 195) giving us in its narrator a "guide" (Aldama 47), having a "camera-eye style of journalistic narration" (Novoa 18) and — as Charles Casillo characterizes Rechy's career-spanning project — merely taking "his readers cruising with him, in and out of gay bars, dark alleys, dank underpasses, shadowy parks, and badly lit streets, transporting them into his own physical and psychological geography" (252). Summing up Rechy's career, Kevin Arnold puts it quite succinctly: "John Rechy's notoriety as a writer has seemingly

been based on his documentation of gay male subcultures in the 1960s and '70s" (115). Interestingly, Arnold uses *The Sexual Outlaw* as a way to corroborate this very claim, arguing that the novel's informative subtitle ("*A Non-Fiction Account, with Commentaries, of Three Days and Nights in the Sexual Underground*") allows Rechy to "authorize and validate" the truth-value of his early texts. Conscientiously if parodically fabricated at its production, the text's nonfictional value works to frame the queer radicalism embodied by Rechy's pseudo autobiographical and eponymous figure in ways that depend on its own cinematic rhetoric.

This chapter takes Rechy's subtitle seriously and places this text as a formal departure from his earlier novels, highlighting the ways nonfiction cinema made its way into *The Sexual Outlaw*'s form and style. Rechy's appeal to nonfiction cinema in the text's form and style helps him at once theorize his own role as "documenter of the gay underworld" while presenting a forceful argument about the role of the gay underground and its symbol, the sexual outlaw. Rechy reaches back to the darkened theaters of his youth for inspiration, finding in cinema an apt form with which to explore not only issues of gay representation (amidst the period following the Stonewall riots), but issues of identification and desire that evoke Rechy's childhood fascination with cinema and its stars.

As Arnold himself notes though, "Rechy's version of documentation is... a strange one, as he is ultimately less concerned with factual reportage than he is with the *impossibility* of documentation, with what he cannot represent" (118-9), an aspect that

Rechy makes the very center of *The Sexual Outlaw*. The text follows Jim during a weekend as he has sexual encounters with over sixty different partners in those gay bars, dark alleys and shadowy parks Rechy frequented as a self-described sexual outlaw. Yet, in his 1984 foreword (attached to all subsequent editions), Rechy writes that he “conceived this book as a ‘prose-documentary,’” arguing that the stark style was “intended to suggest a documentary film” (15) — putting into relief the way his text, keenly aware of the “impossibility” which Arnold points out, nevertheless wishes to import for his readers the framework of film documentaries. This becomes readily apparent when one looks at the way Rechy structures his text in his table of contents:

FOREWORD	16
<i>FRIDAY</i>	
11:07 A.M. The Apartment. The Gym.	21
1:04 P.M. Santa Monica. The Beach.	22
2:25 P.M. The Pier.	24
Voice-over: <i>Promiscuous Rage</i>	28
3:48 P.M. The Restroom by the Pier.	33
MONTAGE: <i>The City</i>	35

By framing itself as a documentary, Rechy wishes his text to be understood *as a film*, one which imports certain expectations from nonfiction films and more importantly, one which depends on its very textuality to perform the cinematic sensibility it evokes. This is evident in the table of contents, which feels more at home at an editing bay (with its time-stamps) or in a screenplay (with its layout privileging location and scene headings) than

in the pages of a novel. Rechy is re-configuring his reader as a reader *and* viewer. In writing *The Sexual Outlaw*, he tells us, he “attempted what [he] consider[ed] a new approach to the so-called non-fiction novel” arranging random real experiences “so that their structured sequence would stand for narrative development” (15). In fact, Rechy’s text has very little in terms of traditional narrative (driven by character’s desires plotted in action). What moves the text forward is not a sense of building action or even, as Rechy says, “narrative development,” but the mere passing of time. What Rechy refers to as the “structured sequence” of his text is merely the fact that all scenes are organized chronologically. Instead, the text is comprised of erotic scenes presented in explicit detail intercut with a series of sections titled “voice-overs,” “montages” and “mixed media”<sup>6</sup> that feature Jim giving interviews and public talks about the political valence of the documentary’s eponymous figure as the respected author of *City of Night* and *Numbers*. These sections offer a larger context for Jim’s sexhunting world and further cement Rechy’s argument that the sexual outlaw is a “symbol of survival, living fully at the very edge, triumphant over the threats, repressions, persecution, attacks, denunciations, hatred that have tried powerfully to crush him from the beginning of ‘civilization’” (299).

Rechy’s hyperbolic language, not far removed from that of Vidal’s own *Myra Breckinridge*, stresses the text’s insistence on engaging and enraging its reader-as-viewer. Rechy’s attempts at mirroring and utilizing the very framework of a nonfiction film (from the “raw footage” of the experiential passages to the heavily editorialized essay-style sections) result not in a “bifurcated novel” (Pérez-Torres 207) but in an explicit attempt at negotiating the claim to verisimilitude that a prose documentary elicits.

In this sense, *The Sexual Outlaw* follows Dennis Altman's conviction that "the best social analysis grows out of personal experience, and that experience without analysis is insufficient for understanding why homosexuals are stigmatized by society" (Altman 16).<sup>7</sup> Rechy makes his protagonist a fictionalized version of himself who cruises, sucks and fucks in one scene, and then speaks out on "S & M," "The Gay Parade" or "Beyond the Fag Hag" in the accompanying nonfiction pieces. In *The Sexual Outlaw*, Rechy is both documenting camera and documented subject. Openly, the text borrows certain expectations from nonfiction films yet tellingly depends on its very textuality to perform the cinematic sensibility it evokes. The use of italics, indentation, as well as chapter titles and other paratextual features of Rechy's novel work to emulate documentary elements, even if, as Arnold points out, this only accomplishes the opposite effect. Throughout, for example, Rechy does away with color and uses black and white imagery, invoking the pervasive and long-held principle in the late 1960s "that black-and-white [cinematography] connoted serious gritty reality" (Harris 219). Thus, if Arnold is correct in diagnosing Rechy as following in the same footsteps as Foucault and believing that "sexuality is 'not a problem of fantasy, it's a problem of verbalization'" (126), *The Sexual Outlaw* forces us to question why Rechy would turn this "verbalization" into a cinematic problem.

The nod to documentary films in a text that purports to plunge us into the sexual underground of 1970s Los Angeles — a making visible that traffics in its own invisibility — becomes the way Rechy's text stages the homosexual's "decisive relation to the power of the gaze" (Edelman 200). If I borrow Lee Edelman's formulation it is because Rechy's

prose-documentary quite lucidly presents in the “sexual outlaw” a figure whose legibility (and therefore intelligibility) is as tied to his sexual body as it is to the very process of making that body readable *as* homosexual. Edelman argues that rhetorically the figure of the homosexual is always configured as something to be looked out for; both because it *can* be seen and because we might *not* see it. Located in dimly lit streets and shadowy parks, the cruising glances of fellow outlaws (and the policing glances of the LAPD) construct Rechy’s Jim, a process the text itself will formally echo by its own construction *as* a prose-documentary, one that anticipates and creates its reader as a viewing public, a spectator intent on participating in that which he lustfully witnesses. Rechy’s novel, structured as it is around following this figure as if watching a documentary about (and tellingly, *by*) him, attempts to frame outlaw sexuality within the larger context of post-Stonewall gay liberationist rhetoric that, as Edelman has argued, necessarily depends on codifying and registering sexual identities. The explicit language that pervades the sexual encounters in the novel and the text’s impudent assertion that “Promiscuous homosexuals...are the shock troops of the sexual revolution” (Rechy *The Sexual Outlaw* 299) may read rather quaintly from our vantage point, but both functioned (and continue to do so) as radical statements against the post-Stonewall gay sensibility of the late 1970s that sought and demanded political recognition through its investment in homosexuality as a monolithic sexual identity. Promoting a different type of project, David Halperin’s insight that “Official, public, out-and-proud gay identity has no tolerance for shame, solitude [and] secretiveness” (94) is nevertheless helpful in locating Rechy’s prose-documentary within a current attempt at looking back at the facets of gay culture that



have been kept outside of activist politics and liberationist rhetoric. As current LGBT political conversations continue to hinge on socially viable rhetoric (and necessarily sanitized notions) of love and marriage, Rechy's sexual underground, premised as it is on the secrecy of the badly lit streets and a notion of culture that depends on its very invisibility, can help us continue Halperin's own project of pushing back against what he sees as the dominant single-dimensionality of current approaches to gay male subjectivity, taking us instead into dark underpasses where, as active spectators, we find ourselves complicit in Rechy's project.

Thus far, this project has dealt solely with narrative film, hewing closely to the studio system which made an industry of fictionalized dramas. Yet, as nonfiction film scholars remind us, "Lumiere's first films are all admirable documentaries: trains pulling up at stations, workers leaving their factories, still interesting to look at today" (Anderson 70). Filmmaking began with a desire to record life. Such was Thomas Edison's and Lumiere's aim: to document and record the world around them. Before filmmakers such as Georges Méliès and D.W. Griffith began to turn a new technology into a new art form, the focus was on the novelty of cinema, its ability to present life-like moving images for audiences. Those filmmakers interested in the continued job of documenting the real world, turned to nonfiction films and what came to be called documentaries.

Defined broadly by the founder of the documentary film movement, John Grierson, as "the creative treatment of actuality," film documentaries offer a formal and stylistic framework for Rechy with which to represent and tackle the revolutionary

potential of the figure of the sexual outlaw. But what is it that Rechy's text gains by presenting his text *as* a documentary film? On the one hand, the choice to label this text a "non-fiction account" functions mostly as a way to frame the mode of reception of the text: the various stylistic choices Rechy makes throughout to evoke the experience of watching a documentary film function as ways to claim verisimilitude even as he calls that very category into question. This proceeds from the normally agreed upon (though not uncontested) proposition that documentaries present and record *real* events. As early as 1932, Grierson, was beginning to define what the nonfiction film could accomplish, noting how nonfiction films could better record the "real world":

First principles. (1) We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital form. The studio films largely ignore this possibility of opening up the screen on the *real world*. They photograph acted stories against artificial backgrounds. Documentary would photograph the living scene and the living story. (2) We believe that the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world. They give cinema a greater fund of material. They give it power over a million and one images. They give it power of interpretation over more complex and astonishing happenings in the *real world* than the studio mind can conjure up or the studio mechanic recreate. (3) We believe that the materials and the stories thus taken from the raw can be finer (more *real* in the philosophic sense) than the acted article. Spontaneous gesture has a special value on the screen. Cinema has a sensational capacity for enhancing the movement which tradition has formed or time worn smooth. Its arbitrary rectangle specially reveals movement; it gives it maximum pattern in space and time. Add to this that the documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shim-sham mechanics of the studio, and the lily-fingered interpretations of the metropolitan actor. (21, emphasis added)

Grierson's passage brings up questions that have plagued nonfiction filmmaking from its start. First of all, he notes that the documentary is a "vital form" which is tied to "life

itself.” Yet, with his emphasis on the ability of cinema to interpret the modern world, he develops an argument that sees in nonfiction film a way to open up social questions *about* the real world. Grierson imagines not merely a descriptive model for nonfiction filmmaking, but an inquisitive one. Grierson’s emphasis on the “real world” may sound disingenuous given the obvious ways in which cinematography, soundtrack and editing can reframe “life itself” and mediate it just as much as the “lily fingered interpretations” of actors and fiction-film directors alike, yet, as Stella Bruzzi, notes, “filmmakers and spectators alike comprehend the inherent difficulties with representation in the nonfiction film but... this understanding does not invalidate either the documentary film or the documentary pursuit; that a documentary itself is the crucial point at which the factual event, the difficulties of representation and the act of watching a documentary are confronted — if not resolved” (7). Nevertheless, this conviction that nonfiction films provide a less mediated version of reality is at the core of documentary rhetoric. Even in its labels — documentary and nonfiction — these films aim to adopt an objective stance and vision in regards to their object, even if this is construed and presented as *merely* a performative stance. But while this veneer of objectivity is merely a stance, Grierson emphasizes how nonfiction filmmaking focuses on the “native” actor and scene. These concepts run through documentary scholarship. Slowly, the social and political engagement of the genre begins to appear alongside them. In 1935, Paul Rotha’s “Some Principles of Documentary” distilled Grierson’s principles and asserted that “above all, documentary must reflect the problems and realities of the present,” (53) while A. William Bluem in 1965 reminds us that “there must be a social purpose” in the

conception of any documentary and that a “documentary seeks to inform, but above all, it seeks to influence” (77). This leads people like Bill Nichols to succinctly note that “The pleasure and appeal of documentary film lies in its ability to make us see timely issues in need of attention, literally” (ix). This brings us up to the late 1970s where Rechy found the nonfiction film coming of age as a growing field, especially when it came to tackling social issues from the Vietnam war (1972’s *Winter Soldier*, 1974’s *Hearts and Minds*) to mining strikes (Barbara Kopple’s 1976’s *Harlan County, U.S.A.*), from psychiatry (Peter Robinson’s 1972’s *Asylum*) to the counterculture (in such concert docs as D.A. Pennebaker’s 1973’s *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* and Ivan Král’s 1976’s *The Blank Generation*). These groundbreaking documentaries were premised on the interpretative ability of “native actors and scenes” to affect (as well as reflect on) the contemporary problems which these filmmakers were tackling.

A documentary is at once informative but contains within itself an argument about what it is presenting, underscored by the notion that what it represents on screen bears an indexical relation to the real world. Under these rubrics it is easy to see how John Rechy’s collage of texts in *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* lives up to its subtitle and, as such, embeds into its own form a sensibility that is clearly associated with nonfiction filmmaking. With its narrow window of observation (a three-day weekend in Los Angeles), Rechy’s text aims for a detailed and sustained look at one character’s actions. This arbitrary limit is borrowed from film documentaries where budgets and time constraints usually curtailed the amount of footage that could be shot and edited. Prose and fiction have no such limits and thus, Rechy’s self-imposed restriction already signals

a desire to hew close to documentary filmmaking rather than the exhaustive reporting in nonfiction prose or the longer chronology so preferred in (auto)biographical *testimonios*.<sup>8</sup> What Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw* is interested in, is in tracing and mapping the various (censuring and desiring) gazes that construct and titillate the cruising homosexual. Rechy here is tapping into the potential of the documentary image that Michael Renov identifies when he argues that the documentary image functions in relation to both knowledge and desire, evidence and lure, with neither term exerting exclusive control. Rather," he notes, "that knowledge is produced on the stage where instincts, impulses, desires, fears, and the will to appropriate struggle against one another" (101). This is precisely what makes *The Sexual Outlaw* such a compelling platform with which to delve into the identity-based politics and post-Stonewall enthusiasm that Rechy finds so suspect.

The impetus of documenting the seedy gay world in the decade following the Stonewall riots was particularly important to gay artists because of the way in which the policing gaze of the mainstream press (as well as that of law enforcement) had controlled how Americans understood homosexuals and homosexuality. No article may serve as a better example of this than the exposé on "Homosexuality in America" published in *Life* magazine in 1964, which decreed that "A secret world grows open and bolder. Society is forced to look at it — and try to understand it" (66). Taken at face value these words could very well preface Rechy's own text, though the Chicano writer from Texas would necessarily favor parody over Paul Welch's intended paranoia. More importantly, this article is the very type of journalistic malfeasance Rechy's prose-documentary sought to — if not rebuke — at least complement. Unlike the type of positive portrayals of gay

Americans that attempted to replace the figure of the “homosexual” as a pervert, a case history, a sinner, Rechy’s text follows the conviction that there’s strength in inhabiting and owning these positions: “For centuries homosexuals...have been prosecuted and persecuted,” Jim states during an aptly titled voice-over chapter, “The Gay Sensibility”:

“The law tells us we’re criminals, and so we’ve become defiant outlaws. Psychiatrists demand we be sick, and so we’ve become obsessed with physical beauty. Religion insists we’re sinners, and so we’ve become soulful sensualists. The result is the unique, sensual, feeling, elegant sensibility of the sexual outlaw” (193-4). That elegant sensibility, though seemingly abstract in both Jim and Rechy’s words, gets grounded in the material history of 1970s Los Angeles, diving into what Welch’s title, “The ‘Gay’ World Takes to the City Street,” referred to. In his “Mixed Media” chapters, for example, Rechy’s text offers readers the social context of late 1970s Los Angeles by presenting news headlines and blurbs from *The Los Angeles Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek*, which focus on the LAPD’s relentless prosecution of homosexuals despite rising statistics for murder and rapes in the city.

Rechy’s interest in the perilous encounters between men, both sexual (between consenting tricks) and violent (between cops and outlaws), structures his documentary as they both center around the issue of visibility which Edelman locates in his analysis of the *Life* article:

*Life* engages in the ideological labor of constructing homosexuality as a problem or social concern that cannot be disentangled from the historical process by which “homosexuals become more visible to the public.” Insofar as the magazine participates in this process by making the “secret

world” of homosexuality visible to its (presumptively heterosexual) readership, it does so in order to foster an internalization that it seeks to effect by reproducing in its readers the magazine’s own interest in learning to recognize the denizens of the gay world who are “nearly impossible to detect.” (156)

Rechy proceeds from a similarly contradictory vantage point; writing from *within* the “secret world of homosexuals” and making us privy to it, he presents his nonfiction account as the type of exposé *Life* offered its reader. But while *Life*’s own textuality remains a limited feature of its exposé (adding little are its accompanying backlit, shadowy photos of men in motorcycle garb), Rechy gives his text the semblance of offering direct *visual* access to the very thing that remains a coded secret in Welch’s article: homosexual sex. This is epitomized in a transcript of an exchange between a plain clothed undercover policeman and a man on Selma Avenue Welch provides as an example of the attempts the LAPD made to crack down on “lewd behavior” in Los Angeles:

Officer: What’s on your mind after we get home? That’s what I want to know.

Jerry: Well, what’s on your mind?

Officer: Well... I don’t know.

Jerry: You don’t?

Officer: Well, that is to say (laughs)... there isn’t anything to drink at my place, you know. (72-73)

The exchange continues and ends when the cop cannot get Jerry to vocalize the very act for which he would have been arrested. *Life* attempts to give a view of the “sad and often sordid world” (66) of homosexuals, but Rechy actually plunges you right into, filling in

the knowing ellipses, silences, and laughter in the officer's setup with scenes of cock-sucking and fucking, which are nevertheless happening in an open invisibility.<sup>9</sup> Here is Rechy, for example, describing a scene at a public restroom:

The silent identification is given in a glance by the new presence, a goodlooking [sic] bodybuilder. Jim's hand drops lightly before his own groin; the man who just entered touches it. The youngman [sic] who stood at the mirror has moved into the stall with the other. Aware that they may be interrupted at any moment, Jim and the other move into a vacant stall. Open mouths kiss, hands touch trunk-straining groins. The two bodies thrust against each other, oblivious to all danger. (33)

Welch's transcribed conversation becomes a series of glances that recognize, beckon and create the very outlaw sexuality they produce yet it is in Rechy's text where we find the specter of the stereotype of promiscuous gay men unabashedly represented. Furthermore, as Jim's plentiful and proliferating encounters will attest, Rechy celebrates this outlaw sexuality even as it already flew in the face of post-Stonewall configurations of socially viable gay identity. Rechy, while representing scenes that take place in vacant stalls and darkened alleys, nevertheless imagines them being screened for his reader.

The value of *The Sexual Outlaw* lies not in its valorization of outlaw sex and its attendant privileging of the sexual subculture it produces, but in its packaging these now familiar (though no less controversial) arguments within the confines of a written documentary film. This is why Rechy is not interested in the circuitous conversation Welch transcribes, but in the interpellating gazes of cops and fellow cruisers. These gazes get literalized by the text's invocation of documentary film rhetoric, turning the recording gaze of the camera into a lustful cruising gaze. Rechy turns to the framework of the



documentary within the textual confines of the novel because it provides his text with an indexical relationship to reality and its unmediated representation, even as it betrays that transparency in its inability to provide the very images it purports to record. This is encapsulated in Rechy's own choice of words when he describes the novel as "the literary equivalent of a film documentary" ("John Rechy 1934—" 263). Yet, his text mobilizes this very framework as a parodic performance *of* a documentary. Rechy's subject matter (outlaw sexuality) necessarily ironizes this framework by presenting us with "footage" that veers close to pornography, gleefully making us privy to a world that, as Jim tells us, is "invisible to all but the participants and the voyeuristic cops" (206), thus conscripting us as active participants in the acts we find ourselves reading.

Rechy's formal and stylistic choices that make *The Sexual Outlaw* read *like* a documentary are also what makes it such a compelling platform to delve into the identity-based politics and post-Stonewall enthusiasm that he finds so suspect. To explain this, I will turn to Peter Adair's *Word is Out*, a landmark gay documentary released the same year as Rechy's text. The comparison, restricted as it will be to the opening scenes of each documentary, will nonetheless show how anomalous yet prescient Rechy's vigorous appeals for sexual revolution were in the context of a post-Stonewall consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Adair's documentary belongs to the 1970s trend in documentary filmmaking that saw the production of early queer non-fiction films which aimed to make gay individuals visible and thus gain for them a political position from which to effect change. Ken Robinson's *Some of Your Best Friends* (1971), Arthur Bressan's *Gay U.S.A.* (1977) (and here one may be tempted to add the controversial PBS documentary series *An American Family*

(1973) with its muted but nonetheless positive portrayal of the Loud gay son, Lance<sup>11</sup>) as well as Adair's own documentary were produced amidst a cultural consciousness that wished to present to the world faces and stories of American gay citizens. As Christopher Pullen puts it in *Documenting Gay Men*, Robinson's documentary and *Word is Out* "define a slowly emerging movement in documentary at this time: The gradual unveiling of gay social existence, and identity concerns, authored as much by gay performers themselves as the producers who represent them" (93-4). This impetus towards creating positive images came from the harmful negative images which had begun taking center stage in mass media epitomized by the 1964 *Life* article, but also by television programs like Mike Wallace's "CBS Reports: The Homosexuals" (1967). Combined with the proliferation of stock homosexual characters in studio films,<sup>12</sup> mass media continued promoting a discourse of homosexuality both as a disease and a crime.<sup>13</sup> *Life*'s assertion that the secret world of homosexuality grows open and bolder, forcing society to look at it and try to understand it, is taken up in earnest by Adair's documentary. Amidst these portrayals, Rechy offers us an insightful text through which to explore what an alternative to these documentaries looks like, especially as its discussions on sexual politics articulate arguments which later gained traction.<sup>14</sup>

I want to use *Word is Out* — the more celebrated documentary of the group — to present one version of the "just like us" (the "virtually normal") argument in order to helpfully underline what we have been discussing in term of Rechy's argument and style in *The Sexual Outlaw*. What is striking about these documentaries (and *Word is Out* bears this out), is their attempt to downplay the very features of non-fiction filmmaking we

have seen Rechy deploy in *The Sexual Outlaw* in order to steer clear of heavy editorializing, letting the subjects “speak for themselves,” as it were. Upon its release, Lee Atwell suggested that *Word is Out* and *Gay U.S.A.* were

unique documents in the history of cinema because they represent, for the first time, a truly open response to the world of a vast and extremely divergent human minority that is now on the move to secure its human rights and full participation on an equal basis with the heterosexual majority. Each film speaks with a voice long denied the access to the media which has been granted other minorities, and one which will no longer remain silent in the face of bigotry and oppression. (Atwell 229)

These “voices long denied the access to the media” are presented with the appearance of unfiltered mediation. In *Word is Out*, for example (much like in the type of social and historical documentary films of the late seventies and early eighties), there is an obvious decision to avoid the “voice-over and other forms of narration associated with the older tradition of documentary filmmaking” (454). From the first images, Adair’s film wishes to make clear to its intended audience (seemingly a heterosexual audience though its distribution at LGBT film festivals and at large gay metropolitan areas belies that intention) that we are witnessing an unmediated look into “Stories of some of our lives” as its subtitle made explicit.

Literalizing what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner later identified as heterosexual culture’s demand to identify oneself and one’s politics within the private sphere<sup>15</sup> (of one’s home, one’s bedroom), both *The Sexual Outlaw* and *Word is Out* transform the private space of the home into a decidedly public one. They both open with images of reconfigured domestic spaces that house their respective subjects: the former

opens with Jim working out in his apartment while the latter opens with Nadine Armijo (one of twenty-six people featured in the documentary) sitting comfortably in her bed. While both documentaries enter the intimate space of an apartment with their cameras (real ones in the latter, imagined in the former), they complicate the perception of the home as a private space. While Adair's film mobilizes a gay politics within such publicly mediated intimacy (letting cameras into bedrooms and metonymically into people's private sexual history), Rechy upends that very framework. His text begins, as its first section heading informs us, at "11:07 A.M. *The Apartment. The Gym.*" This leads to a quick montage-like list of the places where the "hunt" will take place:

He prepares his body for the hunt. A dancer at the bar. A boxer in the ring. Prepares ritualistically for the next three days of outlaw sex. The arena will be streets, parks, alleys, tunnels, garages, movie arcades, bathhouses, beaches, movie backrows [sic], tree-sheltered avenues, late-night orgy rooms, dark yards.

Despite situating us in Jim's apartment, Rechy immediately offers us instead a list of the public places that will host the sexual outlaw during his hunt. In his voice-over chapter "Consenting Adults, Explorer Scout Girls, and Glittering Bisexuals" Rechy explores the Supreme Court's decision stating that "homosexuals are not necessarily entitled to the right of privacy ensured by the Constitution" (117). As his documentary analysis shows, privacy gets appropriated by the heterosexual married couple in legal language thus allowing the persecution and prosecution of homosexuals in both public and private spaces. For Rechy the solution is a reversal, or better yet, a collapse: the public park made sexual, the private space made public. In Warner's words: "When gay men or lesbians cruise, when they develop a love of strangers, they directly eroticize the

participation in the public world of their privacy” (179). Rechy’s first scene disavows the bedroom as a privileged site when it comes to sexual intimacy. On the other hand, *Word is Out* opens with a still shot image of a woman sitting in her bed while petting her dog. The shot slowly begins to close in on her face as someone off-screen asks “Were you, were you always... gay?” She responds with a hesitant “always?” as she searches for her answer. What follows is a moment when the straightforward question seems to at once confuse but also enlighten Nadine: “I don’t think so, maybe, I don’t know, it’s hard to say. Yeah, I think I been... yeah, gay.” While in Rechy sex is at the center of our introduction to Jim, Nadine is introduced to us within the rhetoric of gay identity politics — even while her own first words call into question the monolithic impetus behind such an enterprise. From its very first image Adair’s documentary locates us within the safe domestic space of the bedroom, which will be devoid of any direct appeal to or depiction of sex. While Rechy pluralizes the sites of sexual intimacy, making the public/private divide no less marked but no more determined, making places such as the streets and alleys ultimately sexual arenas, Adair’s film desexualizes the bedroom with an image of mundane and all too common domesticity.

This image of common domesticity is what makes *Word is Out* a productive counter-example to the form and content of Rechy’s *The Sexual Outlaw*. The subtitle of Adair’s film, “Stories of Some of Our Lives” encapsulates the community building enterprise implicit in its production and dissemination, even as the syntax leaves out the very subjects whose life stories we are about to witness. That “our” and its structuring principle in the film is what led Vito Russo to end his landmark study *The Celluloid*

*Closet* (1981) with a discussion of Adair's film. Dismissive of the early mistake of gay liberation in asking Hollywood to reaffirm the "myth that homosexuals are just like heterosexuals except for their attraction to the members of the opposite sex," Russo ends his study with a glowing assessment of Adair's documentary suggesting that "the two hour journey of *Word is Out* is filled with instant recognition for gays. The people in the film," he says "point out the remarkably common experience of growing up in America; a straight world" (189, 245). For Russo, the film succeeded in fostering not only a community building exercise on screen but also through it. Yet what Russo ignores is how Adair's film visually reproduced that "early mistake of gay liberation." Speaking in the 30th anniversary DVD bonus commentary *Word is Out: 30 Years Later*, Rick Stokes, one of the original subjects of the film looks back on the importance of Adair's documentary and boasts "what an out there thing this was. To have people openly identified as gay back then and showing the world, hey! they look just like us, don't they? Cause they are us!" Stokes's slippage between similarity ("*just like us*") and kinship ("*are us*") is what's at work in the choice of shooting these "stories of some of our lives" within the confines of domestic and unthreatening spaces. Visually, the film constantly highlights the ways these people look just like us; Nadine's plain clothes speak as loudly as her sexuality. Russo, who upon seeing the film had remarked that "The silence of gay people on the screen has been broken" (Dunlap 32) helpfully locates us in a moment in post-Stonewall consciousness where spotlighting the differences in growing up gay in straight America was seen as somehow disavowing the assimilationist rhetoric and argument which it nevertheless depended on. But Stokes's choice of words ("they *look*

just like us”) points again to the paranoia behind the *Life* magazine article (and, in Edelman’s view, all writing about homosexuality). Thus, if what we immediately get in Adair’s documentary are images of gay Americans that look just like “us” (an “us” which already delineated a distinction between us and them that managed to maintain difference even as it claimed fraternity), what opens Rechy’s documentary is a sexualized body whose very purpose is to be prized and admired for its exceptionality. While Adair forces his viewers to read his subjects within the private sphere of the home and the bedroom with nary an overt gesture to the sexual happenings of said spaces, Rechy makes a point of sexualizing the seemingly mundane routine of an early morning workout. After giving us ostensibly an establishing shot: “The city is Los Angeles,” Rechy’s prose zooms into Jim’s apartment; we get an impersonal introduction to his protagonist:

He is stripped to sweat-faded cutoffs. His pectorals are already pumped from repetitions of dumbbell presses on a bench, inclined, flat, then declined; engorged further by dumbbell flyes extending the chest muscles into the sweeping spread below the collar. His “lats” — congested from set after set of chin-ups — slow, fast, wide-grip, medium-grip, weights strapped about his waist for added resistance that will allow him to do only half-chins as the muscles protest — flare from armpits to mid-torso. His legs are rigid from squats held tense at half point. (21)

What opens the novel is a man’s scantily-clad body being groomed to be as unique as that of ballet dancers and boxers; decidedly *not* like yours. Jim (who remains unnamed for a couple of pages) is broken down into engorged muscles performing exercises. The muscles, in fact, get imbued with more agency than Jim himself. This first paragraph reduces Jim to his muscles (which are “congested,” “engorged,” “extending” and which later “protest”) and offers us no insight into his psychology, forces us to visualize quite

explicitly the way his body is prepared for the hunt. Rechy locates us in the present tense of Jim's life; only the immediacy of the weight-lifting and, later, of the sex hunt. Given the cinematic context, this paragraph functions like a series of close-ups, slowly panning from Jim's pectorals, down to his waist and his legs. We begin with a series of images intruding into what seems like a native scene of this sexual outlaw before he begins "the hunt." While Adair's initial static shot eventually closes up on Nadine's face, the establishing shot begins with a full-body shot, a choice that gets repeated in every other interview. While Jim is broken down into his own sexually suggestive body parts, Adair's subjects are always presented as fully bodied not to mention fully clothed. Nadine's direct address to the camera suggests an unmediated access to her bedroom and her life story, construing us as invited guests about to hear her story; Jim's workout is presented instead as a coded private moment, one which nevertheless encourages an inviting voyeuristic gaze. Rechy's erotic gaze on Jim while he breathes "orgasmically" (22) — already construed as a narcissistic gaze — gets rewritten throughout the text. As the following scenes will attest, Jim's narcissistic exhibitionism are as pronounced when alone ("In the shower, Jim's soaped hands adore his muscular body" [107]) as when he is surrounded by potential onlookers ("For moments, he stands in the twilit area; exhibiting his body, making sure, as always, that he is clearly seen" [25]). We may be invited into Nadine's bedroom (or Cynthia Gaird's garden, or Roger Harkenrider's rehearsal space) in Adair's film, but in Rechy's text our voyeurism necessarily implicates us in the various activities and outlaw sites that make up the text. This first scene invites us to ogle at his engorged muscles and in attempt to validate these feelings, Rechy presents Jim himself as being



aroused by his own body at the end of his workout: “He stands before the mirror. His cock strains against the sweat-bleached cutoffs” (22). Moreover, this strained cock (anticipating and eager for attention) is placed at the center of the entire text: sex and overt sexuality are inextricably linked to the portrait of Rechy’s sexual outlaw.

More tellingly, Adair’s film moves against the grain of documentary filmmaking by privileging narrative as the structuring principle of the film. As Adair himself remarked in 1993 he and his crew hoped to present “inherently dramatic” portraits and what they settled on were — as he says — “stories”:

No one will watch more than a couple minutes of “This is Mary at her job. This is Mary and her Horse. This is Mary’s Lover. This is Mary’s photo album of growing up. This is Mary talking to her Lesbian friends...” You get the picture, B-O-R-I-N-G. Especially so, if we then launch into “This is Juan. This is Juan growing up. This is Juan’s apartment etc.”... So somehow we had to find a way to tell these separate stories simultaneously, in parallel. (Adair *Word is Out: Press Kit*)

This is ultimately the film’s structure: twenty-six stories being told straight at the camera in interviews by individuals culled from the over two hundred and fifty preliminary interviews of gay people around the country. Rechy’s text obeys a different principle. As he writes in his 1984 foreword, “I wanted to create characters, including the protagonist who might be defined ‘fully’ — *by inference* — only through their sexual journeys” (15). Jim — the only named character in the text — is presented to us as he would be in a cruising scene; defined by his body and devoid of any back story; Rechy gives us “This is Jim. This is Jim working out. This is Jim at the beach. This is Jim having sex.” Adair’s documentary narrativizes his subjects and hopes to show that the full-bodied people in

front of the camera are the outcome of the stories they tell. Structurally, this functions as a metonymy of what the documentary hopes to accomplish. As its sub-divisions make clear, the attempt was to create an oral history of the modern American homosexual: part one (“The Early Years”) deals with at once the 1950s but also with general stories of childhood and adolescence; part two (“Growing Up”) deals with initial sexual experiences that are implicitly aligned with the 1960s culture, while part three (“From Now On”) turns to the implications of coming out and being gay in the early 1970s. Fittingly, the last images we see before the credits roll are those of the annual pride rally, a public venue that following the Stonewall riots of 1969 began to represent a moment of communal political discourse around the subject of sexual identity.

By creating a character who can only be apprehended through his sexual journeys, Rechy disavows this teleological impulse. What matters to Jim and Rechy’s readers in turn, is the present (if fleeting) moment of the cruise. This becomes a key aspect of the experiential passages and something which some of the sex scenes address openly, suggesting that the cruising scene represented on the page gets reworked as a reader-text dynamic. Rechy’s text follows Roland Barthes’s exhortation at the start of *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) that a writer “must seek out this reader (must ‘cruise’ him) *without knowing where he is*” (4). Rechy himself puts it bluntly in his “Outlaw Sensibility” essay, where he argues that gay writers “often produce a seductive prose that reflects elements of gay bar cruising, a flirtatious prose full of subtle messages of constant courtship” (156). Throughout the text, Rechy stages moments of cruising which depend on Jim’s own exhibitionism, so that when moments like the ones that open the text (Jim

at home working out, with no discernible audience) involves the reader into his narcissistic world. Not for naught does one of the epigraphs mark Narcissus as the guiding figure of the text.

And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see... It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. – Herman Melville *Moby Dick* (17)

Jim is the amalgamation of the two mythical figures that appear in Rechy's epigraphs; not only is he Narcissus longing for his own mirror image, but he's Sisyphus (he quotes Camus: "Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully...It is not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing" [17]), constantly engaged in the "cycle of the sexhunt [sic]" (285). Jim epitomizes this by his constant fear of what will come after the present trick is over, quickly moving to the next one: "Only one moment of the time was conquered, the experience ending when it began. Another eternity challenges him. So he drives to another side of the park, to another hill in the arena" (135). Rechy locates in these two mythological figures the spirit of the sexual outlaw. Thus, while the passage from Camus highlights the way in which living and (in this case) writing about living is an endless moebius loop — living is both the experience *and* the description of that experience, Rechy gives us a text that revolves around the moment where the experience and the description collude; where, because of the evocation of the immediacy of filmic images, the presentation of scenes in this prose-documentary will at once show the experience *and* the representation (or mediated description) of the scenes themselves. The Melville passage on the other hand, narrows in

on a specific moment of reading the visual: Narcissus seeing his reflection. Together, both epigraphs work to foreground the importance of the visual in the documentary we are about to read and also set up the metafictional turn of Rechy's text (Camus' description and experiencing). How these two epigraphs more poignantly frame the novel is by tying metafiction, repetition and desire together in a discussion of the visual, elements we can associate with the practice of cruising.

Camus' passage works to evoke the metafictional awareness of Rechy's novel, anticipating Jim's role as both a character that experiences (the sexhunter) and a character that describes (the writer). Yet in evoking the figure of Sisyphus through Camus, Rechy invokes the image of repetition which, unlike the philosophical absurdist picture of humanity Camus depicts, becomes a paragon of sexhunting in Jim. In Melville's passage, that mythical narcissistic desire might set up an exploration of desire of the same (the rampant homosexuality Rechy's text explores) but more importantly the reference to Narcissus functions to imbue the visual with a degree of desire (Narcissus desires his own image). As readers we are haunted by that image that stares (and desires) us back, inviting us to plunge into it. In a sense, while both epigraphs work to paratextually frame Rechy's prose-documentary and do so in terms of highlighting the visual, they work to complicate the very tenuous if necessary relationship Rechy creates between Jim's "three days and three nights in the sexual underground" and the peering, lustful eyes of cruisers and the implied viewers of this documentary alike. Rechy's choice of a documentary framework encapsulates his political convictions that the private and the public are disingenuous categories imposed to maintain a heavily circumscribed sexual hierarchy.

Alongside Adair's celebrated documentary, Rechy's desire to present Jim's sex hunt in the form of a prose-documentary marks a clear retaliatory move against the project of narrativizing sexual desire and making it intelligible within a heterosocial context. Unlike Adair's documentary, which stops right at the bedroom as a publicly mediated intimate space, Rechy's "create treatment of actuality" necessarily coalesces around the sexual native scene and actor of Grierson's documentary rhetoric. Making all public spaces already sexual outlaw arenas encapsulates Rechy's political convictions that private and public are disingenuous categories imposed to maintain a heavily circumscribed sexual hierarchy.

Rechy's text functions as a documentary in that it offers its readers a guide into the hustling world, kept private and at the margin of heterosexual society. Yet by drawing attention to Jim's own body, collapsing into that body the subject and object of the documentary, and placing it in the world of cruising, Rechy implicates his viewers into his covert hustling world. We are not merely watching Jim (who in turn is aware of our gaze — insisting on it, even) but cruising (with) him. This is evident in the last sentence of that opening section: "He stands before the mirror. His cock strains against the sweat-bleached cutoffs" (22). This narcissistic gaze is what is ever-present in the text, which in itself collapses our understanding of Jim's body with our experience of Rechy's text. This is why *The Sexual Outlaw* is a text in Rechy's canon that deserves closer inspection: because it very self-consciously addresses the "persistent view" in the critical reception of Rechy's works that he was, as Rechy thought he was labeled, a "hustler who had somehow managed to write, rather than as a writer who was writing intimately about

hustling ” (120). More forcefully than *City of Night*, for example, the writer/hustler distinction is at once more intertwined (the first person voice-overs are placed alongside the impersonal third-person narrator in the narrative excerpts) but also much more theorized. Rechy’s text constantly questions the distinction between being a writer and being a hustler, even as the form of the text wants to keep them structurally apart. This juxtaposition is no accident. Rechy may try to keep his two selves apart, “confusing when the boundaries meet” (*The Sexual Outlaw* 67), but his text functions as a way to overlay the two and present the now all-too-familiar “personal is political” motto which so purposefully drove the early liberation struggle. As Herb Spiers, writing for LGBT Canadian magazine *Body Politic* put it in his original review: “Read Rechy. Particularly gay male liberationists who still see a shade of lurid in public loving, and gay male outlaws who do love in public but do not see that a quickly spent orgasm is a liberating form of love only if the soul and mind are also liberated. Rechy is insightful on both accounts” (67). The transgressive edge of Rechy’s argument embedded in his prose documentary depends on the boundary between his two selves dissolving; the format allows him to preface his seemingly nonfiction text with an indexical relationship to reality.

The first voice-over models how the overall structure of the “prose documentary” functions. Between his address to a “mixed group of gay and straight people” wherein Rechy asserts that “The promiscuous homosexual is a sexual revolutionary” (28), he offers small vignettes formatted in italics that underscore how homosexuals are branded and persecuted. This section presents a model for how the entire text shuttles back and

forth between voice-over narration and raw footage, making the juxtaposition in print work to create a sense of visual/aural overlay so often seen in documentary films. From “*Jack Paar on television and Liza Minnelli in a magazine joke about ‘fags’*” (29) to “*‘You’re polluted and filthy,’ reads a pamphlet circulated at gay gatherings by ‘Jesus people.’ ‘You will not be gay in hell, but tormented far worse than in this life’*” (30-1), these images and situations are intermixed with Rechy’s address. Instead of seeing them as interruptions, this section presents these vignettes as exemplary of Rechy’s argument in his address that the constant pressures and oppressions around the outlaw produce him and “create his defiance”; “Knowing that each second his freedom may be ripped away arbitrarily, he lives fully at the brink. Promiscuity is his righteous form of revolution” (31). By interrupting his prose with these media(ted) images, Rechy’s speech becomes a running commentary not just critiquing but being born out of its interplay with the images presented. This is precisely how the various sections of Rechy’s text work with one another; the linearity and seeming chronological order of the experiential passages are constantly broken up by these more theoretically-inclined essay sections.

The move of that very first voice-over chapter is one which becomes an implicit precondition of the essay-style sections that will follow: Jim’s first person voice constructs a straight audience for his words. The “I” throughout these sections recalls and mobilizes the authority we usually ascribe to disembodied voice-over narration in nonfiction films, a feature that aspires to be a call to authority while openly editorializing; at once a cinematic tool that nevertheless undermines the notion of film as a purely visual medium. Rechy toys with all these contradictory purposes of voice-overs. He doesn’t aim

for the omniscience of a disembodied voice despite his citing that very function of documentaries. Indeed, all these voice-overs are notable for denying the disembodied nature *of* voice-overs in film. During “Interview 1,” for example, Rechy affords himself the air of authority that comes from being a well-respected writer yet he immediately destroys that pose by noting that the “man who opens the door” and who will interview him “is a man who I’ve been with, anonymously, right in this apartment” (44). The voice-overs, in fact, make Rechy’s body palpable throughout.

If *The Sexual Outlaw* is, as we have seen, a text intent on borrowing the framework of a documentary film in order to both create the sense of a native scene and arm itself with a winking level of verisimilitude, it is also a text that is paradoxically interested in the seductive allure of audience interaction. Rechy may use rhetoric that highlights the way his text aims for documentary realism, but Jim is constantly arguing for the elements of role-playing and performance that define hustling. While it would seem this would put the documentary aesthetic and the subject matter of hustling at odds, it actually helps unearth a tension inherent in the documentary aesthetic. As Paula Rabinowitz puts it, “Documentary presents itself as much more performative than even fictional forms.” This explains Rechy’s structural and aesthetic choice to present his outlaw philosophy in the form of a documentary film:

Precisely because fictional performances (at least those coded within realistic conventions) efface their construction through naturalizing gestures, the response within the audience is contained; but in shifting the site of documentary from an object of vision to the subject of action by insisting on the dynamic relationship of viewer to view, documentary forms invoke performance with their audiences as much as within their



objects. If performance and action are at the center of documentary rhetoric, then it seems that what is being produced is less a psychoanalytical and more an ethnographic scene; an encounter in which observation slides into participation which somehow exceeds transference and identification. (9)

This slide from observation to participation is what is at the center of Rechy's vision of street hustling and what becomes the key aesthetic of this text; it is the way in which his text recaptures young Rechy's queer fandom, creating and inciting an active spectatorship in his readers rooted in the cruising we follow so intently throughout the text.

Documentary filmmaking, as Rabinowitz argues, is at its core a performative genre, one that insists and depends on its audience's interaction with what they are watching. This is because nonfiction films so self-consciously present how they editorialize their subject matter contrary to fiction films' attempts to naturalize such representations and promote instead the feeling for its audience of being immersed and lost in the films they watch.

Rechy's text is invested in the argument that "documentary's meaning, its identity is not fixed but fluid and stems from a productive, dialectical relationship between the text, the reality it represents and the spectator" (Bruzzi 7). As such, *The Sexual Outlaw* constructs situations that play up the way the spectator is implicated in hustling, thus blurring the line between the reality of Jim's sexual hunting and our own process of reading the text as if we were active spectators.

The section titled "FLASHBACK. A House. Last Week" offers a scene that exemplifies the way active spectatorship and performance are key to Jim's hustling and Rechy's text and the way this performance is mobilized to construct his readers as implicated spectators. Not only does Rechy use a cinematic marker to distinguish this

scene from the rest of the weekend, locating it outside of the structure of the three-day weekend chronicled, but his language works to frame the scene photographically:

“Instantly the room was bordered by retreating candlelight; it became a framed picture” (91) we are told. More explicitly, Rechy compares the man’s eyes with a camera:

“The man’s eyes blinked, entrapping each image, like the closing shutter of a camera” (93). With these proliferating photographic metaphors, Rechy retells an erotic encounter that entails nothing more than Jim being asked to replicate a series of photographs for his trick. The whole experience plays as a sexual fantasy come to life. Sexual reciprocity is not even on the table but instead, this scene depends on a voyeur scenario wherein the aroused man who picked up Jim is a director and a spectator. He at once tells Jim what to wear, how to pose, but also insists that Jim pay no attention to him.

Rechy’s scene functions as a model of active spectatorship bringing together the role-playing performance inherent in hustling and the text-audience performativity, which underscores documentary filmmaking. Indeed, Rechy’s scene functions as a narrativized encounter between an adoring fan and their object of obsession. Not only does he suffuse the passage with mirrors and photographic language, but the emphasis on the visual (“showing,” “looking,” “saw,” “glanced,” “recognize,” “stared,” and “images”) is prevalent. The mirror in this particular scene becomes a framing mechanism: “Mirrors embraced Jim in the dressing room. His image was shot back and forth, like projected slides, onto the gleaming glass screens” (92). Jim is constantly seeing himself in the mirror aware of that other gaze (that of the man’s) that also frames his own body. This scene focuses on the power of the audience in creating an identity through the power of

the sexual(ised) gaze. The word that the man uses repeatedly (“Stud”) becomes not only a descriptive exhortation of Jim and his body, but also a space that Jim’s performance will occupy by mirroring the studs in the pornographic magazines the man so enjoys. The man works as a cinematic/theatrical director of the scene: he gives Jim his wardrobe (“faded jeans torn at the thigh and knee, strapped boots, carved belt, vest, denim jacket, a jockstrap” [92]), offers him a dressing room and speaks to him in what seem to be stage directions. “Ignoring me and staring at himself while I stare at him, and he knows I idolize him, he knows it” (93) he tells Jim. The scene moves towards a sexual tableau-vivant. Jim’s role becomes merely that of a model to be looked at: “Not letting me touch it until he’s ready, just looking in the mirror, knowing how much I want him” (93) the man tells Jim.

The role of the spectator is constantly destabilized: the man doesn’t just look but actively reconstructs the erotic magazines “strewn strategically on the floor” (92) which inspire and arouse him; Jim doesn’t just become a watchable object: “In the mirror across the room Jim saw himself, the fantasy framed. He basked in his sexual power, his power to personify the cherished fantasy in this fusing of two dreams” (93). Jim begins to undress following the man’s exhortations. Turning to his photographs for inspiration, the man eventually removes the jockstrap with his mouth and sucks Jim off, while Rechy presents this last moment as a *mise-en-abyme*:

In the framed mirror, Jim saw his own cum spill in slow arcking spurts as the man directed the white liquid onto his clothed body, on the jockstrap, on his face, on his lips, over the open magazine, and on the photograph in

it of a muscular man standing naked over a clothed man surrounded by magazines of photographs of muscular nude bodied. (95)

This scene models for Rechy's readers a version of their own spectatorship. Here we find Rechy's text toeing the line between pornography and nonfiction filmmaking: his erotic sex scenes invite his readers to read on, admire, but also to participate. Here, in our identification with the man Jim is picked up by, we find our own readerly attention implicated in that slide from mere observation to participation as the scene *only* offers positions of active spectatorship that depend on observation-as-participation. This participation is erotically charged, flirts with exhibitionism (both to the present man who creates the scene in his bedroom and to the reader-as-audience Rechy creates) and thus finds itself enmeshed in the very revolutionary act of outlaw sex that Rechy is portraying and performing.

For Rechy, the turn to documentary filmmaking seems well suited to the type of work he had been characterized with. But by taking the prose documentary label seriously, he immediately signals to his readers a level of construction even as what he represents is purportedly real. Here we might pause and note that Rechy chooses to specify it as a *prose* documentary, clearly aligning it with cinema rather than with journalistic documentarian practices, thus calling into question the very modes of representation he models in his text. Citing the aesthetics of documentaries — with voice-overs, montages and an impersonal narrator that constantly mirrors an objective camera in its recording of graphic sexual encounters — Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw* manages to

present his outlaw sensibility within a framework that valorizes itself as “*evidence from the world* [which] legitimates its usage as a source of knowledge” (Nichols ix).

During a decade that saw an increase in visibility, due not only to the Stonewall riots but also to the end of the Motion Picture Production Code as well as the Supreme Court’s decision to relax censorship on printed materials, Rechy’s work presents an enlightening case study in the way queer life was being represented. In a moment of self-awareness over the politics of the project behind *Word is Out*, Mark Pinney — seated at his office in a suit and tie — intones, “I think that the radicals are necessary and I think that *we* are necessary. And the point is, I think, that in terms of coverage we are less sensationalistic. I mean, who wants to see Mr. Middle of the Road? But nevertheless we are there and we’re DAMN important.” Crucially that type of statement became the guiding principle of an identity-politics that continues to this day and which valorizes the “Mr. Middle of the Road” even as it attempts to present him as the unheralded important member of the community. *Word is Out* represents a cultural politics that aimed at bringing Mr. Middle of the Road into a visible (and therefore legible) entity with a narrative (those childhood stories) and a teleology (seeing Stonewall as the mythified end-point of the struggles of those depicted). Rechy’s *The Sexual Outlaw* reminds us of an alternate (albeit complementary) view of the sexual politics of the 1970s. Jim’s sexual battlefield involves the reader, immerses him through sensory descriptions in the darkened paths of Griffith Park and eroticises his relationship to the text, collapsing the hermetic roles of text/reader by suggesting a constant glancing back and forth between Jim and his readers. For Rechy, the turn to documentary filmmaking was well suited to

the type of work he had been characterized by. But by taking the prose documentary label as a formal as well as a thematic concern, he immediately signals to his readers a level of knowing artifice even as what he represents is purportedly real. Citing the aesthetics of documentaries — with voice-overs, montages and an impersonal narrator that constantly mirrors an objective camera in its recording of graphic sexual encounters — Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw* presents his outlaw sensibility within a framework that valorizes itself as “evidence from the world [which] legitimates its usage as a source of knowledge” (Nichols ix). On the one hand, Rechy's text uses the documentary framework to establish itself as a collection of so-called “native” scenes that follow Jim, creating for us a voyeuristic and implicated spectatorship. But on the other hand, Rechy also insists on seeing his text as comparable to his narcissistic body; openly admired and ready to be cruised. The earnestness of documentary form is ironized through hyperbole and Jim's unredeemed narcissism. Despite giving us a tour of the different arenas of the sexual underground and alerting us to ways to identify and locate fellow cruisers, Rechy's prose documentary does not place us as outsiders looking in, hoping to identify sexual outlaws wherever we go like Paul Welch's *Life* magazine article. Instead, the impunity of the documentary form is defied by Rechy's implication of our voyeurism into the very fabric of the text. *The Sexual Outlaw* works ultimately to cruise me and engage me in the very revolutionary work he is advocating, making me a sexual outlaw. In that he follows Barthes' advice: “That was his purpose to display himself here, connect, then to be followed across the street, where he is now” (81). We have no choice but to follow, out of

the visibility of assimilationist rhetoric and into the badly lit streets where the invisibility of outlaw sexuality thrives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richardson is known for his provocative photography. In a recent profile titled “Is Terry Richardson an Artist or a Predator” *New York Magazine*’s Benjamin Wallace notes that Richardson “has cultivated a reputation of being a professional debauchee, a proud pervert who has, outside his commercial work, produced a series of extremely explicit images—often including himself naked and erect—that many find pornographic and misogynistic, and which can make viewers distinctly uncomfortable” (30). The choice to use Richardson to shoot Rechy seems strategically designed to evoke the sense of lurid provocation that defines the two men’s work.

<sup>2</sup> Rechy would later turn this fascination into an exploration of Marilyn’s allure in his novel *Marilyn’s Daughter* (1988) which follows a young woman, Normalyn (an obvious portmanteau of Monroe’s names) discovering she may be the product of the affair between Marilyn and Robert F. Kennedy.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Dudar, writing about the “The Joy and Pain of Gay Books” for the *Chicago Tribune* noted in 1978 that “the love that dare not speak its name became the blabbermouth of 1978.” As Brian J. Distelberg’s recent article “Mainstream Fiction, Gay Reviewers, and Gay Male Cultural Politics in the 1970s” shows, the post-Stonewall decade was a “crucial period of transition and transformation, one during which the nature and politics of gay visibility were in flux” (392). This was keenly felt in the gay press. Marking 1978 “breakthrough publishing year” (393), with the publication of Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*, Larry Kramer’s *Faggots*, Ross Berliner’s *The Manhood Ceremony*, Paul Monette’s *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll* among others, Distelberg offers a reading of gay reviewers and gay fiction of the 1970s which were keen on defining gay fiction “with an eye toward skillfull gay male authorship, mainstream success, openness, and contemporariness, and a sense of the gay experience that included, but was broader than, sex alone” (403).

<sup>4</sup> Tellingly, Rechy’s text was reviewed in the “Nonfiction in Brief” column of *The New York Times* where Alix Nelson finds *The Sexual Outlaw* “wedged among the how-to-manuals and photo albums of famous generals’ horses” and calls it an “explicitly detailed report on the shock troops’ front-line action.” In that very same column, Nelson reviews a physics book that sincerely claims Adam and Eve crashed their spaceship Eden on Earth (*First, Man. Then, Adam!* by Irwin Ginsburgh, Ph.D.), a book on shark hunters (*Shark Hunter*; Trevor Housby) and a collection of women’s erotic fantasies which doubled as a “thin gloss of social psychology” (*The Fantasy Files, A Study of the Sexual Fantasies of Contemporary Women*, Dr. Karen Shanor).



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<sup>5</sup> This particular review, written by fellow gay writer Alfred Chester and titled “Fruit Salad” would remain, for Rechy, a point of contention. He credits it with forever marring his reputation, especially as even in later years, it kept being cited. Gore Vidal himself called Chester’s review “murderously funny, absolutely unfair, and totally true” (“Letter to Gore Vidal (1993)” 172). As late as 1997 — and prompted by a reprinting of the review in their collection *Selections From the First Two Issues of "The New York Review of Books (Winter/Spring 1963)* in 1988 and later in a re-issue of the same book in May 1996 — Rechy saw it necessary to write a letter to the editors of the *New York Review of Books* arguing against both the tone and title of the piece: “In May 1963, there appeared in your journal a piece of malice posing as a review of my first novel, *City of Night*. The “review” was written by Alfred Chester. You titled it “Fruit Salad.” I was young, baffled by the personal assault, and I did not protest. I’m no longer young, I understand the attack, and I protest the abuse and its recent extension” (“Letter to the *New York Review of Books* 177). Barbara Epstein, the then-editor of *The New York Review of Books* printed Rechy’s letter and admitted that the title both then and in its reprinting was outright offensive.

<sup>6</sup> The text is broken up into one hundred and twelve scenes. Eighty-six of these are what Rechy calls the “experiential” passages “in which the protagonist, Jim, sexhunts throughout Los Angeles for three days and nights” though eleven of those are actually “flashbacks” ranging from “Ten Years Ago” to “A Week Ago.” All the scenes are marked (as the table of contents show) with a time-stamp and a location. The other twenty-six sections/scenes are labelled as “Voice-overs,” “Montages” or “Mixed Media.”

<sup>7</sup> In *Homosexual; Oppression and Liberation* (1971), Altman positions Rechy at the heart of the gay American canon (alongside Burroughs, Vidal and Baldwin) but nevertheless portrays Rechy’s early novels as simply depicting protagonists “groping for the capacity to overcome the guilt and self-denial which [their] homosexuality creates and which leads [them] to compulsive hustling” (35). This was an all too-familiar way of understanding Rechy’s work, through the lens of psychoanalytic diagnosis that pathologized the novels’ protagonists alongside their own author, a framework which Rechy alludes to and complicates in *The Sexual Outlaw* by making Jim a stand-in for his own ideas yet never positioning his hustling as tied to guilt or denial.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular, John Beverley’s discussion of the way Latin American writers have appropriated the form and structure of the “testimonio” to advance political ideas in “The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)” *MFS* (35.1 Spring 1989) 11-28.

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<sup>9</sup> Welch's refusal (or inability) to offer the sodomitical scene that his article is quite openly dependent on echoes yet another of Lee Edelman's arguments in *Homographesis*. In his chapter on "A Faithful Narrative of the Proceedings in a late Affair between the Rev. Mr. John Swinton, and Mr. George Baker, both of Wadham College, Oxford" titled "The Sodomite's Tongue and the Bourgeois Body in Eighteenth-Century England," Edelman theorizes the way in which the sodomitical act (and its metaphorical trope, the same-sex kiss) in its absence from the description of said "affair," point to the way sodomy is connected to the inarticulate and the disturbance of discourse itself, but also configured through its connection with a gap in the narrative. Both are tied to the construction of the inviolate, male body, a body that not only refuses to be penetrated but also looked-at. This is precisely what Rechy's text hopes to upend, by forcing its reader to ogle at male bodies while construing him *as* a cruising gay male throughout.

<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Rechy's text has more in common not with Adair's *Word is Out* in terms of politics, but with Rosa Praunheim's 1978 *Army of Lovers, or Revolt of the Perverts (1972-1976)*. This controversial documentary, released only a year after Rechy's text, shares much of Rechy's rhetoric and subject matter. German born Praunheim (born Holger Bernhard Bruno Waldemar Mischwitzky) wanted to follow his first gay film (*It Is Not the Homosexual Who is Perverse, but the Society in Which He Lives* [1973]) with a documentary that moved away from the "gay-as-victim" discourse which he saw pervading the American gay liberation movement and decided to chronicle the more "perverse" side of homosexual life in the United States in the 1970s.

<sup>11</sup> Considered to be one of the initial forays into what is now called reality television, *An American Family* was initially conceived as a chronicle of an American family but ended up capturing on camera the breakup of the Loud family, whose son's homosexuality was portrayed positively (if tacitly — those familiar with the Village culture in New York City and who could understand the subtext of why Lance had a fractured relationship with his parents saw Lance coded as gay even when the issue was never openly addressed).

<sup>12</sup> Vito Russo's 1981 *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* remains an enlightening resource when it comes to exploring the way negative stereotypes (the "sissy," the "predatory lesbian") were rampant in the studio film and how the post-Code filmmaking industry, while starting to portray and discuss homosexuality on screen, still did so with moral caveats perhaps most chillingly summed up in Matt Crowley's *Boys in the Band* "Show me a happy homosexual and I'll show you a gay corpse." See also Larry Gross' *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (2001) as well as *Media Q. Media/Queered: Visibility and its Discontents* (Ed. Kevin G. Barnhurst) (2007).

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Meeker's *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community* (2006) argues that "The emergence of gay male and lesbian communities in the twentieth century United States was in very large part the result of massive changes in the way that individuals could connect to knowledge about homosexuality" (1) and traces this connectivity through the ways mass media created new "communication networks" (13) through which homosexual individuals in the United States came to know about one another and start building communities.

<sup>14</sup> While *The Sexual Outlaw* was not the first or only text of the 1970s to address issues of public sex, sexual identity or political equality, the main question at the heart of Rechy's text (the outlaw nature of the homosexual) has been the center of queer studies, gaining purchase in the late 1980s and 1990s: from Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex" (1984) to Lauren Berlant's "The Queen of America Goes to Washington City" (1993), from Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985) to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1989), from Andrew Sullivan's *Virtually Normal* (1995) and Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal* (1999).

<sup>15</sup> As Berlant and Warner argue in "Sex in Public," "Heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies of intimacy" (533). Later, following ideas put forth by Habermas and Foucault they highlight "the way a hegemonic public has founded itself by a privatization of sex and the sexualisation of private personhood" (559). Heterosexuality as a force of intelligibility has reduced 'sex' to the private realm. As Warner himself argues in *The Trouble with Normal* "The very concept of public sexual culture looks anomalous because so many kinds of privacy are tied to sex" (173). Cruising as a sexual scene provides then a space where sexual culture is "public in some ways, but still intensely private in others" (Warner 173), and this is precisely what Rechy depicts in *The Sexual Outlaw*, at once maintaining seemingly distinct notions of public and private ("I keep my two 'selves' apart — the writer and the sexhunter; confusing when the boundaries melt" Jim notes [67]) yet constantly breaking that down by the ways the text asks us to shuttle between writer and sexhunter from page to page.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Queer Spectatorship in Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*

“Yo quería que el cine fuera la realidad, y por eso las horas que no podía pasar en el cine me gustaba pasarlas contando una película, para que todo el día fuera cine.”

“I wanted cinema to be reality, and thus whatever time I couldn't spend at the movies I spent it re-telling a film, so that all day would be cinema.” (My own translation)  
— Manuel Puig “Entrevista con Saul Sosnowski”

Despite attempts at locating Manuel Puig within a literary lineage, he always pled allegiance to the glittering if seemingly vapid world of old Hollywood. In longtime English translator Suzanne Jill Levine's words, the Argentine writer had a “(com)passionate (ir)reverence for movies” (587). Levine's aptly bracketed wordplay presents one way of reconciling the earnest sentimentality that old Hollywood films represented for and elicited in Puig, with the critical engagement that this very sentimentality seemingly disallows yet motivates his novels. This is what we might understand as Puig's queer relationship to cinema. Early in his career, exemplifying this (com)passionate (ir)reverence for both movies and the literary tradition which preceded him, he created a chart of Latin American Boom writers cross-dressed as MGM movie stars and sent it to a friend (Levine 200): Jorge Luis Borges was Norma Shearer (“Oh so refined!”), Alejo Carpentier was Joan Crawford (“So fiery and stilted”) while Carlos Fuentes was Ava Gardner (“Glamor surrounds her but can she act?”) and Julio Cortázar was Hedy Lamarr (“Beautiful but icy and remote”). Puig's cartographic impulse locates us in the intersection between a Latin American literary tradition and a decidedly

American tradition of cinema starlets, while stressing Puig's own queer relationship to the cross-dressed literary men and the star divas that together make up the list.

The tongue-in-cheek tone of the list sheds light on the function Hollywood served for Puig. On the surface, it shows him flippantly emasculating the Boom men, likening them to the fabricated personas of film starlets. Yet, Puig does not aim to cheapen the literary superstars of the Boom. By juxtaposing the high of Latin American literary postmodernity with the low of American exported cinematic star products, Puig's map creates a discourse that cuts across both places and aesthetic forms. More importantly, in its campy references, it constructs a shared community with its reader grounded not in a vision of Hollywood as an escape from life in Latin America, but as a necessarily queer way to productively think through it: the pairings, while made clearer by Puig's own descriptive annotations, require inside knowledge on both writers and stars for the full wit of the list to be intelligible.

Thus, if Puig is using the "unmistakably modern" sensibility of camp (Sontag *Against Interpretation* 275), he is deploying it to various effects simultaneously. Firstly, the list depends on a queering of the Boom men. The list's insistence on cross-dressing demands we understand these male writers as female stars. Likening Borges to Shearer creates an initially incongruous image due to the different discourses (and aesthetics) they belong to. Borges, perhaps the most metropolitan Latin American writer of the twentieth century, enthralled by libraries and known for the cosmopolitan male protagonists that litter his short stories, is here understood *as* Shearer, the glamorous Canadian-American

actress whose flexible accent and refined features helped her successfully transition from silent films to talkies, and who epitomized the modern woman of the 1930s in a string of successful films, particularly her title role in *The Divorcée* (1930). This cross-dressing comparison depends on conflating Borges' literary style with Shearer's performance while evoking the former's literary stature and the latter's star persona. "Oh so refined!" speaks initially to Shearer's nickname ("Queen of MGM") which she had garnered by not only being the most successful of the MGM female stars, but by the type of roles she chose (the free-spirit modern women as in comedies such as *The Women* [1939] and the regal, poised figures of prestige pictures such as *Marie Antoinette* [1938]). But if Puig's annotation embodies Shearer's star persona and performance style, it also functions as shorthand to describe Borges, whose metropolitan sophistication, polyglossia and investment in high culture produced such well-known short story collections as *Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949). The list creates a "network of mutual recognition and complicity" (Halperin 189). Puig mobilizes the insider knowledge he has on the Boom men and the Hollywood stars in order to include his audience (here fellow writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante, but also us as present readers of the list) in that very knowledge network. While in conversation with camp — here we can clearly see Puig playing on the "structural instabilities of the Hollywood star image" (Farmer 125) — Puig's queer relationship with Hollywood and its stars is a helpful and sophisticated (if not obviously so) way to speak about Latin America's literary postmodernity through his fan knowledge of Hollywood stars.

Despite Puig's fear of reading Sontag's infamous essay on the subject,<sup>1</sup> "camp" has become a necessary framework through which to understand the Argentine's work.<sup>2</sup> Reviewing *La traición de Rita Hayworth* (1968) for the *New York Times*, Alexander Coleman accurately described Puig's characters as proto-Bovarys and proto-Quixotes who "live only for the screen." "Naturally," he remarked, "the first thing that comes to mind is camp" (BR3). While Puig's investment on "the screen" may seem obviously akin to a camp sensibility, I want to locate his playful Boom list away from a tradition that sees camp as essentially a "sensibility of failed seriousness" (Sontag *Against Interpretation* 283) or as a "withdrawal into inverted commas, a flaunting of *self*-definition, a leap frog of distancing" (Beaver 166). That "leap frog of distancing," so prevalent in the various and at times overwhelming discussions on camp is precisely why I rather position Puig's list not as an example of camp (a sensibility that thrives on such indexing impulses) but within the register of queer fandom. If indeed we follow David Halperin in making a distinction between gay diva worship — "a cult that requires the blind faith of credulous fans who are content to kowtow and genuflect and never to even think of peeking behind the curtain" — and camp — "what happens when the curtain is lifted" (33), we have no choice but to locate Puig in the former group. While camp has that sense of distance and of wanting to interrogate (and perform) the very performance of Hollywood stars, Puig seldom aligns himself with such impulses. When asked whether Molina, the protagonist of *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) was a kind of parody of a homosexual, he answered that parody is not a word he trusted too much, "because it carries some degree of scorn" explaining instead that "The character is parodic in itself. If

he's mimicking a woman of the '40s, a film character of the '40s, he's already parodic. It's not me who's doing the parody. Greer Garson wouldn't have liked me to do that" (Christ 573). It is that last line which betrays Puig's allegiance to his diva rather than to a structure which may scorn her. His genuflection for Garson though, need not be taken as uncritical — after all, he does agree that Molina is "already parodic" — but he does not thrive on parody's potential as an authorial tool.

*Hayworth* may indeed remind us of camp, but as Coleman himself notes, far more than merely camping it up, Puig's text re-creates "audience participation on a total scale" (BR3). Not for anything does he praise Puig for the scenes of utter bathos found in the book which could only have been written by a "student of final reels such as Puig." In that early novel, it was already Puig's equal parts knowledge and adoration *for* those reels that made him an internationally renowned writer; not his ability to fabulously camp it out, but to construct in his texts the ability to understand him as an avid movie fan. As a fan — someone who uses his textual knowledge to participate rather than discriminate<sup>3</sup> — Puig is not content with merely depicting the Boom men as old Hollywood stars with his chart. He uses this shorthand to insert himself in the MGM chart and thus into the literary constellation of the Latin American tradition there represented. While he includes Borges, Carpentier and Asturias in the first tier of the chart ("Line I"), he aligns himself with Julie Christie down in the fourth tier of this informal ranking of movie stars alongside fellow friends (and cinematic upstarts, Severo Sarduy [Vannessa Redgrave], Néstor Sánchez [Connie Francis] & Gustavo Sainz [Paula Prentiss]).<sup>4</sup> No Garbo or



Shearer — long-gone but imposing figures in Hollywood’s star cosmology — Christie was, in Puig’s annotation, “A great actress but since she has found the right man for her (Warren Beatty) she doesn’t act anymore” (201). Dubbed an “anti-goddess” by *LIFE* magazine shortly after winning an Oscar for her role in *Darling* (1965), Christie represents — much like Puig does in comparison to the Boom writers— a newer version of a cinema star. Not only was Christie’s sexuality at the center of her star persona, one which was not as heavily controlled or manufactured as the industriously belabored ones of Crawford and Shearer,<sup>5</sup> but she was more overtly political than the stars under the studio system. Unlike his annotations for Garbo or Shearer, here Puig also includes the type of intimate knowledge of the stars fit for a movie fan. Paraphrasing Philip Swanson’s famous description of the Post-Boom (which Puig was instrumental in precipitating), Christie was as much the new face of Hollywood as she was its replacement.<sup>6</sup>

It is with this queer cartographic impulse that the following chapter turns to Puig’s literary output. Divided in two sections, the chapter begins by outlining a figuration of Puig as a queer fan, from his childhood obsession with cinema to his incorporation of said cinematic affect into his early texts, arguing that while Puig’s use of cinema in his work is indisputable, no careful attention has been paid to his emotional engagement with cinema as it is presented in the very form of his texts. Taking that as a jumping off point, the latter part of the chapter reads *El beso de la mujer araña* as a text that self-consciously presents and performs the queer fandom that Puig and his protagonist Molina embody.

That Manuel Puig's career is indivisible from cinema in general and Hollywood in particular is an unquestioned truth in the scholarship on the exile Argentine writer. The first sentence in Jose Amicola's seminal study of Puig's first novel *La traición de Rita Hayworth* admits as much: "Uno de los puntos claves para entender la evolución que la obra de Puig marca en la literatura Argentina es la filmografía de Hollywood" [One of the key things to understand about the evolution Puig's oeuvre establishes in Argentine literature is Hollywood cinema"] (11, My own translation). What Amicola's syntax nevertheless illustrates is the way Puig's affective relationship *to* that Hollywood filmography is left unexplored. The attempts at reading Puig's texts as "campy" necessarily remove the positive affect the writer isolates in his novels, while others have tended to couch his relationship with cinema in terms that abstract it into an imperialist discourse, erasing its very specificity. Both critical moves serve to distance Puig from the various films he adored and the country he grew up in; his affective relationship with the former and his political engagement with the latter get sidelined in service of theorizing his relationship to American cinema.

An early example that epitomizes these twinned approaches is Puig's first mention in the *New York Times* — an introduction that would color not only his reception in the United States but which represented the very reputation he had garnered in Latin America. Mario Vargas Llosa ("Esther Williams: Oh so disciplined [and boring]" [Levine 200]) described the Argentine writer as exemplifying the trend of Latin American literature "stealing from mass culture" (BR7). While not entirely inaccurate, Llosa's appraisal missed Puig's larger and more specific obsession with cinema. In Llosa's

words, which continue to be echoed in Puig scholarship, the cinematic allusions in Puig's text "constitute a utopian alternative, a fantasy where people can escape the degradation of their lives." Yet, as his MGM chart shows, Hollywood wasn't *just* a fantasy repository for Puig, but a short-hand language for understanding the world around him. Levine accurately argues that his use of Hollywood films "nos demuestra cómo Puig desenmascara la cultura popular para analizar la manera en que ciertos valores e ideologías gobiernan nuestras vidas y controlan nuestros deseos" ["demonstrates how Puig unmasks popular culture to analyze the way certain values and ideologies govern our lives and control our desires"] ("De Traiciones y Traducciones" 77, my translation). Yet in the shift from "Hollywood" to "popular culture," Levine recreates a critical sleight-of-hand that disregards the very materiality of cinema as a medium that is at work in Puig's oeuvre. For her the films loved by Toto in *Hayworth* or narrated by Molina in *El beso* become mere *thematic* reflections of them, exposing them as "espejos de la actitud vital de los personajes" ["mirrors of the characters' vital outlook"] (Epple 50, my translation). Along the same lines, Enrique Serna, while attendant to the Madame Bovary-like alienation Puig sketches with his cinematic references, presents an argument that sees cinema as little else than an inspiration for Puig. Bluntly, he argues that Puig "no sólo nació como escritor al divorciarse del cine, sino que mantuvo sana distancia del lenguaje visual (salvo en las técnicas de montaje), tal vez porque lo conocía demasiado bien" ["wasn't just born as a writer upon divorcing cinema, but he kept a safe distance from visual language (save for montage techniques) maybe because he knew it all too well"] (53). What Serna proceeds to do is basically take cinema (or more accurately, the

cinematic) out of Puig's writings, something which recent criticism of Puig continues to do, as if the presence of cinema had been exhausted in discussions about the Argentine writer.<sup>7</sup> Serna argues that Puig was a writer who eschewed everything which literature had taken from cinema, steering clear of the detailed visual descriptions that for him characterize "lo que la literatura suele tomar prestado del cine" ["what literatures tends to borrow from film"] (53): "Puig despojó a sus narraciones de cualquier efecto que pudiera ser mejor logrado con una cámara, y esa desapuración lo condujo al relato coral o polifónico, a pintar bocas en vez de atmósferas" ["Puig stripped his narratives from any effect that could be better achieved with a camera, and that stripping led him to the choral or poliphonic story; it led him to create voices instead of atmospheres"] (53, my translation). Serna is correct in asserting that Puig's narratives steered clear of the omniscient narrator whose camera-like roving and recording language he repudiated. Yet, Serna's notion that descriptive language is the sole thing literature can borrow from film is what allows him to conclude that cinema was merely a gateway medium that propelled Puig into fiction. This narrative, of a film fan turned literary author is a familiar one in Puig scholarship and one which my chapter rewrites. Instead of seeing Puig's turn away from writing and producing films in order to write fiction, I will stress how Puig's works aimed to recreate the affective relationship young Manuel experienced at cinemas during his childhood and which he continued to experience as an adult gay man.

Manuel Puig was enamored with movies and their stars from an early age. Born in 1932 in General Villegas, Argentina, Puig saw his first movie when he was three years old. His mother, who used to go to the movies almost daily before getting pregnant,

decided she would take her then three-year old boy with her to the only movie theater in town, El Cine Teatro Español. Sadly, the dark environment and the moving figures terrorized young Manuel, who burst into tears. As a solution, his father decided he would show his child the projection room, from where Puig saw his first ever movie, James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). That moment in the theater, watching Whale's classic horror film from behind the projector was, to borrow Michael Moon's Barthesian word, the "scene" ("the first thing we love is *a scene*" [Barthes 192]) that initiated Puig into Hollywood and consecrated his love for it. Young Manuel (later to be immortalized in the character of Toto in Puig's first novel *La traición de Rita Hayworth*) was — like the proto-queer boys Moon examines<sup>8</sup> — searching the images he encountered "with a particular hunger to see represented some of the elements of their own most compelling feelings, desires, fantasies, and fears — images that can be not only glimpsed but gazed at, stored in memory, retrieved, and thereby subjected to something like the full intensity of desire" (Moon 5). Moon's description of those scenes, dependent as it is on a type of visual reproduction that proliferated during the time-frame he studies ("from Henry James to Andy Warhol") speaks to the ways Puig apprehended movies as a child as both a place where reality was an escapist fantasy but also, as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, a way of reworking the world into their own image. As D.A. Miller notes when discussing the allure of the Broadway musical to proto-queer boys growing up, cinema hailed Puig as if it had been calling out his name, and met him so well that in finding himself called for, he seemed to have found himself (65). The attraction grows out of and is reflected in the very form of the musical; Puig's early encounter with Whale's film —

watching it from behind the projector — points to an understanding of the materiality and artificiality *of* film. This is why a reading that merely points to Puig’s affinity with film in terms of its escapist or representational potential needlessly elides the way Puig understood and drew attention to cinema as something manufactured yet not for that any less enjoyable.

This is why I locate young Manuel alongside Moon’s “small boys” and Miller’s own autobiographical treatise on Broadway musicals. Together, as David Halperin demonstrates in *How to be Gay*, Moon and Miller identify how to speak about the relationship between mainstream culture and gay children. Here the moniker “gay” is obviously unhelpful as an erotic orientation, but instead “consists in a dissident way of feeling and relating to the world” (Halperin 13). Puig’s obsession with cinema exemplifies this very dissident way of feeling as we have seen with his MGM chart, which has its genesis in those afternoon film screenings he shared with his mother growing up. Thus, in his own words, Puig always sought to recreate that moment: “[Lo que me interesaba era] Recrear el momento de la infancia en que me había sentido refugiado en la sala oscura” [(What interested me was) Recreating that moment in my childhood when I felt safeguarded by the darkened theater room”] (Wyers 164). Puig’s most famous text, *El beso de la mujer araña*, as we will see later, quite literally recreates that darkened room and is structured so as to recreate the feeling Puig had early in his childhood when he went to the movies.

In stark contrast to the writers we have been looking at in the previous chapters, all of whom were first and foremost writers, Puig began as a filmmaker. From that very first experience at Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein*, Puig and his mother saw over two thousand films in a decade, going to the movies over five times a week. This was despite living more than six thousand miles away from Hollywood, though not surprising when one factors in that "during the early sound era Latin America was the leading market for Hollywood films. It consumed 37 percent of about 230 million linear feet of film" (de Usabel 80). Puig's obsession with cinema led him to pursue a career in filmmaking. Not only did he learn French, English, German and Italian (the languages of cinema) but at age twenty-three he moved to Rome on a scholarship to attend the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Experimental Film Center). Immersed in the neo-realist vein of the school, and realizing that his Hollywood darlings were looked down on by a generation of students who saw nothing in the dream-machine of Hollywood worth rescuing, Puig fled. He went first to Paris and then to London where he would continue trying to write screenplays in English. He started out drawing them out like story-boards, as if "huyendo de la palabra" ("fleeing from the written word") (Bortnick). Puig's friend Mario Fenelli told him he should write in Spanish about the people he knew: "I began to write an introduction in the voice of an aunt of mine — a kind of voice-over" he told the *New York Times* in 1985, "It was supposed to be three lines long and what happened is I couldn't stop for 30 pages. It was one banality after another. But I found I could not cut a lot of it. It was the sum of the banalities. After three days, I realized I had a novel. I had stories that needed more space than the hour and a half or two hours a movie gives

you” (Freedman C11). The banalities which overflowed from his screenplay became *La traición de Rita Hayworth* (*Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* in English, though as Lucille Kerr notes, the English translation does away with the grammatical ambivalence of the Spanish title wherein Hayworth is both subject and object of the treachery [28]).

Puig’s turn to fiction is not prefaced on a simple turn away from cinema. On the contrary, Puig only found his way into novels as a way to solve a cinematic problem. He stated that what motivated that turn away from cinema was a need for more “narrative space” (“espacio narrativo”) (“Prologue” 10). More tellingly, perhaps, he argues that fiction prose allowed him to better confront (“enfrentar”) reality. Fiction writing, he says, allows him to mince (“desmenuzar”) the reality around him; not only to break it down, but to cut it. In this way, film editing — as a structure that allows one to sculpt time and space through cutting — is the organizing framework of Puig’s writing. Moon argues that his small boy — be he James or Warhol — returns to that original scene in order to subject its images “to the full intensity of desire” (5) by following the very technologies we are discussing here. Thus, while for Moon, these images could be “mentally cropped, framed, sequenced and resequenced, ‘zoomed in on,’ flipped through, run in reverse, run in slow motion, set to music and provided with spoken narration, copied, captioned and recast” (6) metaphorically, we find in Puig a writer who was intent on literalizing these visual metaphors and find room for them in his writing; first in those banal-ridden imagistic screenplays, and later in his seemingly campy novels.



What Puig found in literature was a way to corral his never-ending banalities with that very same device that led him to the novel: the voice-over. Voice-over narration refers to moments in films when a voice is heard on screen but whose origin (body) is not represented or when a voice-over track is used in conjunction to the body from which it emanates as a way to index and represent the interiority of its characters. As Mary Ann Doane notes, the “voice displays what is inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible: the ‘inner life’ of the character. The voice here is the privileged mark of interiority turning the body ‘inside-out’” (41). Fiction films use voice-over narration as a way to give the audience an entry-point into the narrative. But how does a voice-over function outside of cinema? What happens when the voice-over is divorced from its accompanying images? This is the question which stimulates Puig’s early texts, mobilizing a seemingly disembodied voice to create the sense of cinematic spectacle. This is evident from his very first novel. Much like his subsequent novels, *La traición de Rita Hayworth* opens with a dialogue between a number of characters, plunging the reader into a colloquial conversation:

Mita’s Parents’ Place, La Plata, 1933

- A brown cross-stitch over beige linen, that’s why your table-cloth turned out so well.
- This tablecloth alone gave me more trouble than the whole set of doilies, a full eight pairs... if they paid more for needlework, I could hire a sleep-in maid and spend more time on embroidery, once I get my customers, don’t you think?
- Embroidery doesn’t seem tiring, but after a few hours your back begins to ache. (7)

The pseudo-dramatic format of the text suggests two voices in conversation, but without the helpful paratexts of the dramatic form: no character list, no stage directions. Dubbed a novel of formation (“una novela de formación” [Vivancos 635]), Puig’s first novel is set in the rural outskirts of Argentina, where, as Jean Franco suggests, “the novel traces the intense affective relationship between Toto and his mother and friends, a relationship in which Hollywood films such as *Blood and Sand* and *The Great Waltz* provide somewhat bizarre models for an affective life which is not satisfied either by religion or the state” (340). The novel already contains within itself what would become staples of Puig’s work. The disembodied voices which open the novel, offering few details to the reader regarding where, how and what surrounds them, become the central structure in *El beso de la mujer araña* which will also recreate for its reader that affective life modeled by Hollywood films. The dialogue format forces the reader to gather information through inference, simply hearing the voices with no accompanying images. Here we have the “choral or poliphonic story” that Serna was discussing, with Puig-as-narrator pretty much absent, leaving his characters to orally tell their story.

In addressing this tendency to “stay outside the narrative as much as possible” Puig mockingly dubbed himself “*veddy moderne* (“A Last Interview with Manuel Puig” 576), evading any connection to the modernist aesthetic which seems so self-evident in his prose. Arguing that “Freud killed the novel of the nineteenth century” (having revealed a whole “back room... to which we have no direct access”), Puig flips the well-regarded modernist narrative that tells us Freudian psychoanalysis gave authors more insight into the unconscious, making them tread inward for narrative purposes. In Puig’s

words “You can present fragments of behavior but never the totality. You can never say, as Tolstoy did, ‘Anna was jealous’ or ‘Anna hated’ or ‘Anna loves,’ because now we know that those feelings are so much more complex than they were supposed to be (576). This emphasis on behaviors which can only suggest the interior motives behind them is precisely what Puig deploys in his fiction. He prefers to use the type of cinematic shorthand Virginia Woolf complained about when she dismissed the 1914 film adaptation of *Anna Karenina*: “A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness” (183). The reason Woolf felt so disenchanting with cinema was the way it could only connote what Tolstoy’s novel allegedly denoted: the inside of Anna’s mind. For Woolf, Tolstoy gives his reader Anna’s “charm, her passion, her despair” (182) while cinema emphasizes “her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet” (182). This attention to details, in seeming disregard (or inattention) to the inner states that the nineteenth century novel so depended on, while they define cinema for Woolf, may also function as a helpful description of Puig’s fiction project. Those endless banalities that overflowed into his first novel show him not breaking away from cinema to achieve something different in fiction, but instead find him discovering in fiction an expansive medium that needn’t restrict the amount of details he wanted to list.

Returning to his campy approach to the Boom, it is not surprising that when pressed to cite a literary predecessor he admits that he has none. “No tengo modelos literarios evidentes,” he confesses, “porque no ha habido, creo, influencias literarias muy grandes en mi vida. Ese espacio está ocupado por las influencias cinematográficas” (“I don’t have clear literary models, because there haven’t been any great literary influences

in my life. That space has been taken up by cinematic influences” [Corbatta 596, my translation]). He points instead to the Marlene Dietrich vehicle *Dishonored* (1931).<sup>9</sup> Josef Von Sternberg’s film follows a Viennese prostitute (Dietrich) who is recruited to work as a spy during The Great War. Known only as Agent X-27, she handily seduces and betrays enemy officers. It is only when she meets Russian spy Lt. Kranau (Victor McLaglen) — equally intrigued and repulsed by her wily ways — that she falters. Having fallen in love with him, she lets him escape and condemns herself to a dishonorable death at the hands of a reluctant firing squad. While you need not look far to see in X-27 the melodramatic beginnings of Molina, the film-obsessed homosexual protagonist of Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña*, it is in Puig’s earlier novel *The Buenos Aires affair* (1974) that he cites the Dietrich film explicitly. Puig’s self-described “detective novel” opens in true noir form with Clara Evelia waking up in Playa Blanca to find out her daughter Gladys has seemingly been abducted. The novel, which eventually reveals who has kidnapped Gladys, is more interested in mining the psyches of its two protagonists; the kidnapper and the kidnapped, ultimately reconstructing for us their sordid childhoods, their torrid romance and their morbid presents. What is of interest here is not the plot, but the epigraphs that open each of the sixteen chapters that make up the novel.

These epigraphs represent a “gay male canon of queer moments from Hollywood cinema” (Halperin 2012, 124) and together they delineate what I have been calling Puig’s queer film fandom. As a curating exercise, these epigraphs point to stars and films that have come to be identified with gay male culture in the late twentieth century. Each is taken from a different old Hollywood movie (from 1931’s *Dishonored* to 1955’s *I’ll Cry*

*Tomorrow*) and focuses on its respective glamorous star (from Marlene Dietrich to Susan Hayward) offering a snippet of dialogue that frames the ensuing chapter. The first epigraph, taken from *Camille* (1936) lays out not only tonal and thematic motifs that run through Puig's deconstructed noir novel, but sets up the very practice of queer film fandom that the curating exercise of the epigraphs perform:

I

*The handsome young man:* You're killing yourself.

*Greta Garbo:* (feverish, trying to hide her fatigue) If I am, you're the only one who objects, now why don't you go back and dance with one of those pretty girls. Come, I'll go with you, what a child you are (she gives him her hand).

*The handsome man:* Your hand's so hot.

*Greta Garbo:* (ironic) Is that why you put tears on it, to cool it?

*The handsome young man:* I know I don't mean anything to you, I don't count. But someone ought to look after you, and I could... if you let me.

*Greta Garbo:* Too much wine has made you sentimental.

*The handsome young man:* It wasn't wine that made me come here every day, for months, to find out how you were.

*Greta Garbo:* No, that couldn't have been the wine. So you'd really like to take care of me?

*The handsome young man:* Yes.

*Greta Garbo:* All day... every day?

*The handsome young man:* All day... every day, why not?

*Greta Garbo:* Why should you care for a woman like me, I'm always nervous or sick... sad... or too gay.

(from *Camille*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) (3-4)

On first view the epigraph itself establishes a film fan register: not only does Puig use Greta Garbo's name to denote her character (while downplaying the importance and star quality of her male counterpart, Robert Taylor) but he indicates which studio produced the film. Garbo and Metro-Goldwyn Mayer then are the only specific details we are given about the film in question (no mention of director nor a release date), placing emphasis on the film as a timeless star vehicle production. Puig's decision to isolate the female star and the studio that made the film engages a knowing audience (film fans of a certain persuasion), giving them the only key pieces of information necessary to helpfully decode the scene at hand. And even when his reader is not necessarily assumed to be a fan of Hollywood cinema, Puig is careful to embed in these epigraphs a comprehensive and representative look at the female stars of the Hollywood studio era. A quick glance at the epigraph as presented elucidates what Garbo and MGM connote for Puig and should connote for us: a romantic melodrama. *Camille*, based on Alexander Dumas's book *The Lady of the Camelias* (*La Dame aux camélias*), opens with Marguerite (Garbo) trying to fund her expensive lifestyle in the only way she knows how: by luring a rich Baron. This simple setup is complicated by Marguerite's fondness (and later love) for the "young handsome man" in the epigraph. The entire film vacillates between Marguerite wanting to forsake it all for the love of Armand (Robert Taylor) or trying to repay her debts by staying with the Baron (Henry Daniell). The film plays like a comedy of errors trapped in a melodrama, and as the epigraph suggests the film exists solely as window dressing for Garbo. Her performance as Marguerite (as she wavers from man to man and slowly worsens from tuberculosis) is little else than a star turn for the Swedish actress. Tellingly,

Puig spotlights the moment where Taylor's Armand confesses his love for Garbo's Marguerite.

The scene revolves around the very issues of loving actresses that the book's epigraphs perform. The episode plays like a scene of an adoring fan meeting a beloved star whose distance and indifference had initially fueled his desire. Here we might recall Judy Garland's song "You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Want To Do It)" discussed in chapter one, whose very message depends on the fan's repeated but unrequited glimpses of the star: "My heart beats like a hammer/And I stutter and I stammer/*Every time* I see you at the picture show" she belts.<sup>10</sup> Armand's desire for Marguerite is fueled by those endless days he came to see how she was doing without ever making his presence felt or known. But if that desire is sexual in the film, Puig's exchange omits any mention of it, giving us a glimpse instead of the "affective sensibility of fandom"<sup>11</sup> at work. Literally an admirer from afar who fell in love with Marguerite at the theater (seeing her across the aisle), Armand is a figure of the fan. He acknowledges that he doesn't mean anything to Marguerite and that he doesn't count. His love for "Garbo" is figured as something to be offered but which need not be requited, as unidirectional and aspirational as that of a film fan who loves Garbo, the star. The scene, as Halperin notes, is a "queer moment" not just because it invokes the queer icon that is Garbo, but because it upends the seemingly straight-forward (not to mention straight) romantic scene in question. The relationship between Armand and Marguerite, rather than being centered on sexual desire is instead construed as an inverted parent-child relationship. Garbo may chide her handsome young man by calling him a "child" in an attempt to lure him away from her, but his language of

caregiving presents him as an affectionate parent rather than a sexual one. This is how Puig reframes Armand from being a leading man to being a surrogate fan figure. Having exiled sexual desire from the scene, Puig shows us that it is Armand's desire to care for Garbo that is at the center of the scene. While Puig cannot enter the space of *Camille* to help or take over Armand, his epigraphs work as ways of mobilizing his love for her and other stars in order to take care of them. With this curating exercise, Puig expresses his own desire to take care of Vivien Leigh, Hedy Lamarr and Norma Shearer all day every day despite them being "always nervous, sick, sad," or (and here the pun is all too blunt for his contemporary readers) "too gay." By presenting these snapshots — which focus on uproariously melodramatic scenes — Puig's text stresses both the affect that these scenes depend on and the affect they instill on audience members like himself. If Armand is a figure of the fan (motivated by desire which cannot be wholly collapsed into sexual desire and intent on having that desire acknowledged even when admiring from afar), then Puig is noting that there's no way to *not* love Garbo (the image of her at least); it can't just be the wine making us sentimental.

The epigraph not only represents the fandom Puig exhibits but it formally registers it. Firstly, while referencing a film, Puig's epigraph does little to present the scene as cinematic. Instead he transposes it to a dramatic dialogue format (which will become the form of his follow up novel, *El beso*) including a handful of stage directions. Here relegated to give information about "Greta Garbo" ("she gives him her hand," "ironically," for example) in later epigraphs these stage directions helpfully contextualize the starlet's storyline for his reader. Here he is prefacing a line of dialogue from *Marie*



*Antoinette* featuring Norma Shearer as the eponymous French monarch: “a young woman whose hair has turned white after a few months in the People’s Prison, walks up the platform of the guillotine where she’s to be decapitated, suddenly she remembers herself as an enraptured adolescent in the Viennese palace at the time of her prospective engagement to the Dauphin of France” (98). While these stage directions may suggest a desire to emulate printed screenplays, Puig distills a breadth of information into them that multiplies the “uncanny temporalities” (Moon 5) in which the scene takes place. The epigraphs harken back to the as-yet-unfilmed screenplay. Yet they do so by eschewing that conceit the moment they choose to eliminate character names and privileging the female star instead, and giving directions that could just as well be a result of the performance rather than the script or direction; “ironically,” for example. Yet they attempt to recreate the experience of watching the film, giving us information of what we are supposed to be seeing visually even when it doesn’t present it as such (“suddenly she remembers” signals what is a flashback in the actual film). In this sense, the epigraphs contain within themselves both a sense of the production of the film and its reception.

While Puig’s queer fandom in theme and form is relegated to epigraphs in *The Buenos Aires Affair*, it becomes the guiding structural principle of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. It is in that later novel that the young handsome man’s sentimentality for Garbo becomes both the defining character trait of its protagonist and the formal sensibility of the novel.

There's a song in Kander & Ebb's Broadway musical adaptation of Puig's novel called "Where You Are" that finds the eponymous Spider Woman singing Molina, a prisoner at an Argentinean prison during the "dirty wars," into forgetting where he is and retreating instead to "lie beside her on a movie screen." Molina has been convicted for misconduct with minors and has been placed (strategically we later learn) in a cell with Valentin Arregui, a known revolutionary leader whom the prison ward is intent on breaking. To pass the time once lights are out, Molina in both text and stage musical spends his evenings telling Valentin of the movies he adores, recreating them in detail for his cellmate's pleasure. On stage though, the suggestion of escape which is raised in the text ("I was feeling fabulous, I'd forgotten all about this filthy cell, and all the rest, just telling you about the film" [17]) becomes the central conceit behind the character of Aurora, the Spider Woman: "Come here and play with me" she coos to him,

Turn off the lights and turn on your mind  
 And I can promise you you will find  
 You will like my plan, my sweetest fan,  
 My leading man  
 Anywhere you are!

The 1992 musical, which Puig was excited about though he didn't live long enough to see it open,<sup>12</sup> condenses all of the movie stars Molina is obsessed with in the book into one single muse, Aurora played by Chita Rivera in the West End and Broadway productions. Known for her theater work, Rivera's casting was a strategic way of importing the type of

affective relationship Molina had with his female stars onto the stage. In the transition to the stage, Kander & Ebb clearly hung onto the idea of movies as an escape, and thus in the lyrics I have quoted above, Aurora is both star and narcotic. In her imperative (“Turn off the lights and turn on your mind”) she crystallizes what Molina argues his bedtime stories are to his cellmate Valentin. Indeed, most of the novel takes place in a darkened room with Molina helping Valentin “turn off” his mind as well. But while the Kander & Ebb reading merely borrows the superficial layer of Puig’s novel (movies are an escape), the lyrics above point to a more sophisticated reading that is in line with the queer film fandom we have been tracing in Puig’s career and which becomes both theme and form of *El beso de la mujer araña*. Aurora refers to Molina as her “sweetest fan” but follows that label with another claim, calling the convicted window-dresser her “leading man.” Here we get the same conflation we witnessed in Armand in *The Buenos Aires affair*. Molina’s role as the “sweetest fan” is what allows him to insert himself into those screen memories as a leading man. That degree of participation, of breaking down the barrier between one’s life and what’s on screen, which we saw in Williams’s Tom Wingfield, Vidal’s Myra Breckinridge and Rechy’s Jim, is here again retooled as a markedly queer relationship to cinema. Here we have Puig’s desire to make “todo el día cine.” More to the point, this is precisely the structure of the text, wherein Molina’s cinematic retellings not only are the diegetic force that drives the novel, but whose very purpose is to recreate for Valentin the feeling of watching those films. While *La traición de Rita Hayworth* flirts with Hollywood and finds Toto playing out a pseudo-autobiographical version of Puig’s own life, and *The Buenos Aires affair* includes in its framework “a gay male canon

of queer moments,” it is the 1976 novel which crystallizes how Puig’s cinematic origins color his fiction and stage a queer fan indoctrination for his readers.

Puig’s “most ‘filmsy’” novel (Tittler 46) opens by telling us, “Something a little strange, that’s what you notice” (3). This strangeness (“algo raro”) pervades the entire novel. Eschewing the use of a narrative frame and comprised mostly of dialogue exchanges between the two cellmates, *El beso de la mujer araña* privileges at once the very orality of its characters but intercuts their exchanges with written reports and a number of footnotes which point to the print-based nature of the text. But the strangeness which opens the novel is also a cinematic strangeness. Spoken by Molina the line refers to a woman whose strange appearance betrays the supernatural background which turns her mundane life in New York City into a horror movie:

— Something a little strange, that’s what you notice, that she’s not a woman like all the others. She looks fairly young, twenty-five, maybe a little more, petite face, a little catlike, small turned-up nose. The shape of her face, it’s more roundish than oval, broad forehead, pronounced cheeks too but then they come down to a point, like with cats.

— What about her eyes?

— Clear, pretty sure they’re green, half-closed to focus better on the drawing. She looks at her subject: the black panther at the zoo, which was quiet at first, stretched out in its cage. But when the girl made a noise with her easel and chair, the panther spotted her and began pacing back and forth in its cage and to growl at the girl, who up to then was still having trouble with shading in the drawing. (3)

The first lines play with our expectations. Molina, as we learn, is re-telling Valentin the film *Cat People* (Jacques Tourner, 1942). “This formal ambiguity forces the implicit acceptance (through an initial disorientation) if not an explicit recognition of a certain

relationship between the reality of the cell and that of the film” (Colás 79). The film revolves around Irena (Simone Simon) discovering she is part of a long-line of cat women from Serbia whose inner-feline is unleashed with a kiss. The first couple of sentences make the as yet-unnamed Molina sound like an omniscient narrator introducing a character in the fiction of the novel, perhaps the very Spider Woman the title promises us. This is quickly dismissed by the fact that a voice interrupts him: “What about her eyes?” establishes the exchange as a dialogue. Still, Molina soldiers on with his narrative about the girl in the zoo. With the first lines the reader is placed in Valentin’s shoes quite explicitly but here Puig is also situating us in the darkened theater where Molina first watched *Cat People*. Tourner’s film, the first in many successful RKO horror pictures of the 1940s, turned the werewolf trope on its head (not least by making its protagonist/villain a woman) and aimed to rehabilitate a genre that was slowly becoming passé and disposable. What makes *Cat People* stand out among the slew of horror films to open in the 1940s is its simplicity both in story and in technique. Following Fritz Lang’s “old premise that nothing the camera can show can possibly be as horrible as what the mind can imagine, [the movie] shows nothing — and suggests all” (Everson 183), something which Puig’s initial dialogue hopes to reproduce for us in Molina’s words. In its most famous and frightening scene, Jane Randolph’s Alice, fleeing from what she suspects is the panther woman, finds herself walking across Central Park in the middle of the night. All we hear are footsteps approaching. Here’s Molina describing this very scene:

— Right, at this point she begins really shaking with terror, she has no idea what to do, doesn’t dare turn around for fear of seeing the panther woman, stops a minute to see if she can hear the human footsteps

anymore, but nothing, total silence, only the rustling of leaves moves by the wind... or by something else. Then she lets out a long, desperate wail somewhere between a sob and a moan, but the wail is drowned out by the noise of automatic doors on the bus that's just stopped. (30)

Molina's version of the scene is full of the "embroidery" which Valentin accuses him of ("Then you're inventing half the picture!" he bellows [18]). In the film itself, Jane Randolph's character doesn't actually "let out a long, desperate wail" ("un grito de desesperación" [36]). Instead all we hear is the cat-like hiss of the screeching bus. Despite this, Molina's retelling conveys the way Tourner's film draws out its most terrifying sequence from the tension of impending danger. This terror is simultaneously heightened and deflated with the screeching bus which scares Randolph's character and audience alike for its suddenness and loudness amidst the silent environment the scene had been creating. Thus, Molina, in his "embroidery" establishes that he's not inventing but "round[ing things] out for [Valentin], so [he] can see them the way" Molina sees them (18).

Puig opens his novel with a film that prides itself on "showing nothing and suggesting all" as this will be the crux of the novel and of Molina's role in it. The "quasidramatic form" (Tittler 50) of Puig's novel becomes a vehicle for this. Puig's own lack of third person narration to frame his characters gives us nothing to situate us in this cell, other than Valentin and Molina's voices. The lack of a narrative frame forces the reader to imagine not only the cell as well as Molina and Valentin's faces (without being given any descriptive information about them) but the very gestures and actions which their dialogue at times only minimally suggests.<sup>13</sup> We are in the dark fictionally and

metafictionally, and while Molina offers us plenty of detailed narration, it is only about the films he's seen in other darkened rooms.

Since the novel came out (1976 in Barcelona, English translation 1979, publicly available in Argentina in 1983), critics have been treating the films that Molina narrates as moments that offer little more than ways to talk about Molina, Valentin and the action that frames them. David H. Bost argues that “the stories taken from the films often parallel the novel’s central action and thereby provide an insight into the deepest concerns of both Molina and Arregui” (94). *Cat People*, with its themes of unbridled and violent sexual desire as well as its horror metaphor of alienation from traditional narratives of marriage and heterosexuality puts in sharp relief the way Molina is an outcast due to his sexuality and seeming apolitical stance in a heavily politicized time. Much like his earlier novel *The Buenos Aires affair*, *El beso de la mujer araña* was unabashedly critical of the Peronist regimes that only came to an end when the latter novel hit shelves in Spain. Despite being considered a “founding text of a post-Stonewall gay literature in Latin America” for its depiction of Molina, an out gay man, as a political subject (Balderston & Martistany 208, 209), Puig’s protagonist is quite a dated gay character — even by the late 1970s when the novel was published. He is unabashedly feminine and unapologetically vocal about his old-fashioned gender politics (“The kick is in the fact that when a man embraces you ... you may feel a little bit frightened” [244] he confesses at one point). The most salient of these characteristics is his affinity for Old Hollywood glamor — something he and Puig have in common. As the lead up to this section of the chapter suggests, I am less interested in wrestling Molina out of that

stereotype than in examining it *as* a truthful account of non-erotic practices that make up male homosexual culture. Molina's love of film, clearly the motivating force in the novel is precisely what allows him to get close enough to Valentin to barter his own freedom.

Treating the films Molina recounts as solely thematically important leads to arguments that privilege the plot connections across texts (and films) while eliding the necessary and inalienable fact that Molina chooses the specific medium of cinema (and its language) to make conversation. Following the scholarly emphasis on themes rather than form, continues the wider project of taking cinema out of Puig's narration. Critics have privileged readings that understand the films as means to an end: whether they are seen as Molina's "perverse manipulative acts" used to con Valentin into trusting him (Bacarisse 94), or as "representative of an epistemic shift from reason to affect that is paralleled by a shift from word to image" (Reber 65). Critics have pegged Molina as a modern Scheherazade (Tittler 63) telling Valentin "bedtime stories" (Bacarisse 94), but Molina wants Valentin to *visualize* these films and not think of them merely as stories, despite that being the only way he can apprehend them. To argue that *El beso de la mujer araña* is a "written film" under the pretense that there's a way in which a "film could be visualized without any shooting or editing" (Karetnikova & Bier 165) at once neglects the specificity that both film and fiction require *as media*, but also points to the very generic problem at the center of Puig's novel. Molina wants Valentin to *see* the films as he sees them (que "las veas como las estoy viendo yo"), and to do this, he constantly highlights cinematic elements that remind both Valentin and the reader that they are supposed to be envisioning a film. Herein lies the genre-deformation of Puig's novel:



“Molina is a narrator, not a director or cinematographer, and... his evocation of visual data appears in the novel as narrative, not as a real movie” (Bost 94). Even as it depends on its own textuality (accentuated by its dependence on footnotes and printed documents), the novel doesn’t aim to imitate an audiovisual technology — to present a “written film” — but instead, strives to recreate for us the experience of being a movie spectator. Molina’s voice functions to enable Valentin and the reader (his spectators) to *see* things that are not in front of them. His admonishment of Valentin “you never even saw” the film (56) works at once as a way to validate how he’s telling the film but also as a requirement to what he sets out to do. This might also explain why Puig prefers to stay away from real films after *Cat People*. The films that follow are all made-up creations that put his readers at the same level as Valentin, going so far as denying us the possibility of *actually* watching the films. We can only see them through Molina’s narration.

Puig stages in *El beso de la mujer araña* the very critical conversation that surrounds his novel. Through *Cat People*, as we have noted, Puig sets up the two characters that are at the center of his novel and establishes through them a variety of binaries that help structure the novel. Valentin is straight while Molina is gay; Valentin is a man of action while Molina is a man of reflection; Valentin is a doer while Molina is a dreamer. Yet, at the heart of the novel is a competition for a correct way to read and approach films: “the novel juxtaposes Molina’s view of film (the gender-centered passion for genre) to that of Valentin (a conventional view of film as social critique)” (Moses 255). In this view, Puig’s novel establishes a gendered binary between Molina’s

feminized passionate attachment to film stars and banalities, and Valentin's masculine-coded vision of film as ideology. It is not surprising that Molina admits to identifying with Irena, the heroine — "Always with the heroine" (25) — while Valentin identifies with her psychiatrist (25). Molina's diva worship finds him focusing on the very banalities that Valentin cannot stand. Valentin represents a vision of cinema that is only attendant to the medium's ability to transmit ideological agendas through its plots and themes while Molina constantly draws attention to the very process of film production and reception that circumvent merely seeing films as standing *in* for something else. Another way of reading this binary is to see Molina as a fan and Valentin as a critic; Molina spends most of the novel not just retelling films for Valentin but inserting himself in them, while Valentin attempts to keep a distance. When describing an apartment in *Cat People*, Molina admits he's "embroidered" the description a little and that it is the type of apartment he would like to live in (18-9), while Valentin cannot stand Molina discussing food or sex, for those desires take him out of his own self-imposed asceticism. The novel may move towards awakening Molina's inner revolutionary, but it formally ends up registering instead Valentin's immersion into movie fandom. Here *Cat People* lays out the very ideal of movie fandom when Molina describes Irena as "in some other world, all wrapped up in herself" (4). Valentin objects to this: "If she's wrapped up inside herself, she's not in some other world, that's a contradiction" (4). Yet this is precisely what Molina means and here he might be talking of himself whenever he retells one of his films to Valentin: "she's all wrapped up in herself, lost in that world she carries inside her" (4). Molina carries those movies inside him and in retelling them to Valentin, he is

not only making “every day cinema” as Puig yearned for as a child, but he finds himself surrounded by them: “I’d forgotten all about this filthy cell, and all the rest, just telling you about the film” (17) he confesses at one point.

But if Molina is content with reproducing the experience of watching and losing himself in movies at the prison, Valentin listens to Molina recount *Cat People* constantly voicing a psychoanalytic reading of the film, attempting to bring the real world into Molina’s fantasies. After hearing that Irena is afraid to kiss her newly wed husband in fear she will turn into a panther woman, he merely states that “Well, I think she’s frigid” (15) and argues at another point that Irena’s husband has been clearly “castrated” by his mother (17). An avid reader of Marx and Freud, Valentin ignores the generic and formal features of the film, reading it solely as an “allegory” (31). When Molina finally reveals that Irena “is really a panther woman” Valentin shrugs off this statement: “No, she’s just a psychopathic killer” (39). He dismisses the genre of the horror movie, disentangling the plot from the very generic gestures and techniques which encase it. Valentin’s recourse to allegory strips away the specificity of Irena’s horror story. More importantly, he is solely interested in what happens. Time and time again, Valentin simply wants Molina to “tell [him] what happens” (19, 50, 87, 121, 164-5, 224, 231) and “to not get so bogged down in details” (164). But if Valentin is merely listening for the plot and imbuing Irena and her husband with a psychanalytic interiority, Molina is content on focusing on the “details.”

We can better understand how this works by looking at the centerpiece film of Molina's repertory, the Nazi film *Her Real Glory* (*Destino*). Modeled on the films made by Leni Riefenstahl, Puig's made-up movie also borrows heavily from the Hollywood picture *Paris Underground* (1944). *Her Real Glory* follows Leni — an obvious nod to Riefenstahl — a French singer who gets embroiled in the French resistance in Nazi-occupied Paris, not unlike Dietrich's X-27 character from *Dishonored*. Betraying her fellow French insurgents, she falls in love with a German officer who makes her famous in Berlin. Returning to Paris and believing in the German cause, she agrees to be a spy. Helping her German officer catch the leader of the French insurgency, she's killed by the French resistance and dies in his arms. Clearly the film is created for the sole purposes of vilifying the French resistance and aggrandizing the image of Germany, but this doesn't stop Molina from relishing the opportunity to share it with Valentin.

It is during this film that we learn Molina is working with the prison warden to extract information from Valentin, bartering his own freedom for information on the revolutionary's plans. What sets this film apart from the others is that it is the only one to exceed the confines of Molina's narration. While most of Puig's novel follows the dialogue between Molina and Valentin with a handful of written reports giving us access to the prison surveillance on the two cellmates, Puig includes nine footnotes throughout the text. Eight of these are concerned with psychoanalytic, sociological and cultural theories of and about homosexuality. Their place in the text, their mostly incidental relation to the narrative, as well as their culmination in the discussion of a fictional book (*Sexuality and Revolution*) written by a fictional "Danish doctor Anneli Taube" (Puig's

own creation), suggest a level of ironic detachment from discourses that aim to psychologize and diagnose homosexuality.

While those eight footnotes are concerned exclusively with theories of homosexuality,<sup>14</sup> there is one that exists as an extension of one of Molina's film retellings. When Molina stops recounting *Her Real Glory* to Valentin and bids his cellmate good night, the footnote that follows is a "Press-book from Tobis-Berlin Studios, for their international distributors of Tobis-Berlin releases, regarding the superproduction entitled *Her Real Glory*" (82). For fourteen pages — note how here is the type of dilation Puig argued prose allowed him — the footnote expands the world of Leni and her German officer, Werner, giving us even more details about the film than what Molina tells Valentin. The footnote functions as an extension of Molina's narration that points to the very materiality of the film he is recounting (thus its presentation as a press release) but it also places us in Valentin's position wherein we are asked to visualize the film in question, which has no referent outside of the text. The press release, much like Molina's descriptions, is littered with details and banalities. In the footnote we learn, for example, more about Leni's physical transformation from a heavily adorned French-styled singer ("a mechanical doll adorned with the tightest of permanent waves, her two cheekbones heavily rouged over a foundation of white lacquer" [82-3]) to "the girl right out of Sparta" with a "bright, clean face [that] could have belonged to a healthy shepherdess" (83-4). Much more pointedly than Molina, the pamphlet offers this transformation as a sign of Leni's assimilation into the National Socialism of Germany and its leader, even quoting at length Hitler's view on feminine beauty and women's roles

in Germany (“Her single mission is to be beautiful and bear the sons of the world” [84]). In one of the key moments of the film as Molina recounts it, Leni goes to her German officer’s house in Berlin where their love will finally be consummated. I want to quote the following passage at length because it is a clear example of the way Molina’s (and therefore Puig’s) queer fan appreciation of cinema, with its attention to superficial details and unabashed gay diva worship, is incorporated into the stylized descriptions of his films. This is not — or not *just*, as I noted earlier — an example of Puig’s camp sensibility wherein style is valued over content in order to de-stabilize known cultural and gender-inflected categories. Instead, it shows Puig’s ability to embed in the seeming banalities and details of those film retellings, a keen critical outlook without dismissing the escapist and enjoyable quality of the films themselves.

And they go to his apartment, what a place he’s got, but really very strange, absolutely white walls with no pictures and very high ceilings, and not much furniture, all of it dark, like packing crates, but you can see it’s all incredibly expensive, just very stark. The window curtains are in white chiffon, and there are several statues in white marble, very modern, not exactly Greek, mostly male figures, like out of a dream. He orders the guest room prepared by the majordomo, who gives her a rather strange look. But he first asks her, won’t she have a glass of champagne, the very best from her own France, like the nation’s blood streaming up from its very soil. Some marvelous music is playing, and she says how the only thing she loves from his country is its music. And a breeze comes through the open window, a very tall casement window, with the white chiffon curtain billowing in the wind like a ghost, and the candles blow out, the only lighting. And now there’s nothing but the moonlight coming in, and shining upon her, and she too looks like a statue so tall, with that white gown of hers that fits so tightly, looks like an ancient Greek amphora, with obviously the hips not too heavy, and a white scarf almost reaching the floor draped around her head, but without crushing her hairdo in the slightest, just framing it perfectly. And he says what a marvelous creature she is, with an unearthly beauty and most assuredly a noble destiny. His

words make her sort of shiver, she's totally enveloped by some premonition, somehow sensing that in her own lifetime, terribly important events are about to unfold, and almost surely with tragic consequences. Her hand trembles, her glass falls to the floor, Baccarat splintering into a thousand pieces. She's like a goddess, and at the same time incredibly fragile, a woman trembling with fear. He takes her hand, he asks if she's not too cold. She answers no. At this point the music turns fortissimo, violins play sublimely, and she wonders aloud what the melody is trying to suggest. He confesses it's his very favorite piece of music and says the waves of the violins are like the waters of a German river, navigated by some man-god who is actually just a man, but whose love of country makes him invincible, like a god, because now he knows no fear whatsoever. The music moves him so completely, his eyes fill with tears. And that's what's so marvelous about the scene now, because seeing how moved he is, she realizes how much he too has his emotions like any man, even though he seems as invincible as a god. He tries to conceal his feelings by going over to the window. A full moon over the city of Paris, the grounds around the house seem silvery, black trees set against the gray sky, not blue, because the film's in black and white. The white fountain bordered by jasmine flowers in silvery-white too, and the camera on her face then with a close-up, all in divine grays, with perfect shadowing, and a tear rolling down her cheek. (54-55)

This scene of the nested film's narrative points to its own self-conscious awareness of the cinematic *image* it is trying to project. As is customary, Molina spends just as much time describing the "details" of the scene as he does advancing the "plot" for Valentin's sake. Molina focuses our attention on the filmmaking techniques as they service the thematic weight of the film he is describing. At one point Molina confesses that his "embroidery" is so that Valentin can see the films the way he sees them. That seeing is not restricted to merely what is on screen but to the affective reaction caused by such images and in turn to the cinematic apparatus which makes such a reaction possible. Thus, Molina asks Valentin to note the cinematography of the film, marking the change from the warm candle light to the chillier (if more romantic) "moonlight coming in through the window."

Molina's attention to the *mise-en-scène* extends to the scene's score, identifying the ways German music (which Leni adores) punctuates the scene, turning fortissimo as the scene reaches its climax. Even Leni herself seems to be aware of the function of the music as she wonders "what the melody is trying to suggest." Character and narrator alike are conscious of the ways scoring, cinematography and art direction sculpt a film and its reception. Molina even pauses to describe in detail the setting for the scene, which is "very strange, absolutely white walls with no pictures and high ceilings," emphasizing the fact that the statues are white marble, the glass is Baccarat and the curtains are "white chiffon" (something he marks twice). One could say that Molina — a window-dresser, and thus someone attuned to styling rooms for maximum effect — is intent on making Valentin notice the art direction of the film and marking its success in being able to connote the tension at the heart of the film. He is, to use Woolf's formulation, focusing on Leni's "pearls, teeth and velvet."

Molina's own attention to cinematic production features of the film he's describing becomes explicit when, describing the sky outside the window, reminding Valentin that the sky is gray "not blue, because the film's in black and white." He even finishes the retelling of the scene with a description of Leni's close-up as it dawns on her how she's been ensnared into loving this "god of a man." Of course, as the footnote which elaborates on *Her Real Glory* makes all too clear, the details which Molina is singling out are strategic in that they embody the pro-Nazi politics of the film. While the footnote very clearly aligns Leni's change in appearance with her growing interest and belief in Germany's National Socialism, here Molina simply describes her "white gown



that fits her so tightly” but not without carefully associating it with the decidedly Germanic setting of the scene. Her white gown makes her look like a statue while her white scarf, which drapes down to the floor, visually echoes the white chiffon curtains; her body, framed to look “like a Greek amphora” further mirrors the ways she has been made-over to look like a female Spartan in this “very dark” but expensive apartment.

Formally, this emblematic passage shows Molina’s over reliance on similes.<sup>15</sup> He tells us the furniture is dark “like packing crates” (“casi como cajones”) the statues look “like out of a dream” (“como de sueño”) while the German officer’s love for his country makes him “look invincible like a god” (“invencible como un dios”). The abundance of similes points to a literariness that highlights the work Molina is doing in wanting to get Valentin to see and understand the film as he sees/remembers it. As an example let us return to the passage quoted above. At one point, when the German officer is offering Leni some French champagne, here’s how Molina describes the scene: “he first asks her, won’t she have a glass of champagne, the very best from her own France, like the nation’s blood streaming up from its very soil” (“Pero antes le pregunta si no quiere una copa de champagne, del mejor champagne de su Francia, que es como la sangre nacional que brota de la tierra”). Moving away from merely describing the scene (an offering of champagne) Molina’s simile manages to imbue the offer of champagne with the thematic weight of the entire film. With the simile, Molina makes explicit what the aesthetics and the plot suggest. The simile contains within it the betrayal which is at the center of Leni’s plight. The focus on the details of costumes, lights and art direction are not incidental but, as Molina shows us, crucial to an understanding of the film.

Despite the film being very clearly Nazi propaganda, Molina defends his affection for it: “If I had the chance to choose one film to see all over again it would have to be this one” (56). While Valentin would like to see Molina’s attention to aesthetics as eliding the very political undertones of this “Nazi junk” film, Molina is unwittingly also displaying how the politics of this film make their way into its own aesthetic. He does this not by denying its arguable politics (he admits he knows full well it is Nazi propaganda), but by appealing first to its aesthetic quality — “it’s well made, and besides it’s a work of art” he tells Valentin (56) — and second to his first-hand experience of watching the film — “you don’t under-... understand because you never even saw it” (56). For Molina (and Puig in turn), it’s not about doing away with the questionable politics the movie presents, or making them subservient to the style within which it is presented. Here he might as well be quoting Susan Sontag: “To call Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* and *The Olympiad* masterpieces is not to gloss over Nazi propaganda with aesthetic lenience. The Nazi propaganda is there. But something else is there, too, which we reject at our loss” (*Against Interpretation* 25). But while Sontag — at least in 1965; she would famously push back against these very remarks later in her career<sup>16</sup> — is satisfied with arguing that Riefenstahl makes her content “play a purely formal role” (*Against Interpretation* 25), Molina reproduces the various ways *Her Real Glory* uses its own aesthetics to construct Nazi content. Knowingly, he emphasizes the way the film’s sole purpose is vilifying the French resistance while aggrandizing the image of Germany. He marks all French characters as having “ugly” and “criminal” faces (48, 49) while the Germans have “very nice faces” (48). Molina makes these visual cues explicit to

Valentin; Puig's protagonist has not only "already interpreted the context and motivations... in order to communicate to Valentin the same of approximate 'reading'" (Boling 77) of the film, but he wants to reproduce for Valentin the experience of arriving at such a reading himself. These visual cues, which Molina goes out of his way to make explicit to Valentin, situate Puig's protagonist as not just being aware of how style can — in true Riefenstahl fashion — model a certain kind of politics, but embody it. It is Molina's (and Puig's) movie fandom that lead him to model a scene of queer spectatorship for Valentin. But while Valentin incorrectly reads Molina's affection for the film as one necessarily privileging its style and bracketing off its politics (as Sontag's early remarks suggest, we see "'Hitler' and not Hitler" [25] in *Triumph of the Will*), Puig's protagonist shows us he's keenly aware of the propagandist intent of the film by acutely focusing on the way the film's production values — which fascinate and enthrall him — collaborate to make the film's politics explicit both for himself while watching, and ideally for Valentin while listening. This is queer film fandom put to political ends.

What then, do Puig and Molina accomplish by staging a critic-to-fan transformation in the figure of Valentin, an Argentinean revolutionary? Schematically, one may be tempted to see in Valentin's growing fascination and interest in these films *purely as films* as an ancillary effect of the friendship (and brief, if nevertheless critical) sexual relationship he nurtures with Molina. This has led critics to establish that Valentin "comes to see the place of sexual oppression in the society he's struggling to change" (Balderston & Mkistany 209). But while this is a valid approach when dealing

with Valentin and Molina as stand-ins for different if complementary ideologies, my interest lies in the way Molina's attention to cinema's aesthetic, born out of a fan-like appreciation for the medium, makes its way into the Valentin's drug-induced dream that closes the novel.

Throughout the novel Molina retells his films to Valentin as a way to, not necessarily escape but, drown out his reality with cinematic fantasies, wishing to introduce himself into the world of the movies. The last chapter finds Valentin fulfilling Molina's (and Puig's) wish. After Molina is released, having bartered his freedom in exchange for informing on his cellmate-turned-lover, he intends to help Valentin by contacting the latter's revolutionary friends. Instead, he dies at the hands of the police who have been on his tail since he left prison, suspecting his ulterior motives. The last chapter of the novel finds a tortured Valentin in excruciating pain, doped on morphine. In the hazy dream that follows, he imagines a conversation with his former girlfriend Marta, pictures himself arriving at a beach where he sees the title figure and eventually falls asleep, sure that he hasn't betrayed his fellow revolutionaries. This dream, which as Marta tells us is short and happy, is suffused with the type of stylized narrative voice we have been trained to associate with Molina himself. Indeed, both the voice of Marta and the imagined figure of the Spider Woman that haunts the dream work as echoes of Molina himself while the entire dream is cinematic. Valentin's dream-induced film includes shots of a "silvery night... because the film is in black and white" (280) and a close-up of the Spider Woman tearing up, both images which forcefully echo Molina's retelling of *Her Real Glory*. Just as the novel opened with Molina acknowledging that Irena from *Cat*

*People* could be both “wrapped up inside herself” and “in some other world” (4), we find the ending quite explicitly harkening back to it. Adrift on an island with Marta, Valentin fears losing her only to be comforted by her: “I live deep inside of your thoughts and so I’ll always remain with you, you’ll never be alone.” (281). Valentin has internalized Molina’s movie fandom.

To be a queer film fan is to both understand the various ways cinema manipulates you, hoisting you to witness another world, while not eschewing the ways those manipulations move and affect you, making you feel engrossed in what you’re watching. Puig’s childhood fascination with cinema indelibly influenced his future literary career. This influence has been read as one necessarily rooted in a disavowal of the emotional attachment he harbored towards the films and stars he grew up with. The most salient of these approaches is reading his texts as involved in camp. Indeed, the protagonist of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, especially as later immortalized by William Hurt in the film of the same name, seems ripe for scholarly attention as a campy queen. This impulse, a product of a time which aimed to read *Kiss* “as the founding text of a post-Stonewall gay literature in Latin America” (Baldeston & Maristany 208), nevertheless ignored the way Puig and his texts prefer to highlight the affective relationship he had forged with Hollywood cinema. As the “young handsome man” in *The Buenos Aires Affair*, Molina in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and Puig himself show, there is no (or not just) a sense of critical distance at work in Puig’s work when it comes to Hollywood cinema. Instead, within a critical eye that spotlights gendered and normative scenes, Puig manages to imbue his texts and characters with the affection he harbored for those black and white

movies of the 1930s and 1940s he saw with his mother as a child. In this sense, critical reception of Puig as a queer film fan has mirrored the very binary Puig sets up in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*: while critics and scholars have characterized his attention to Hollywood cinema as that of a critic in the vein of Valentin who keenly articulates and problematizes the ideology hidden in the plots of said films, Puig is more in line with Molina, who doesn't quite disregard his cellmate's sharp observations on the films he's telling, but who represents a movie fan who need not dismiss — either through ironic detachment or critical distance — the affect cinema inspires in him. It is this mining for affect that permeates Puig's entire oeuvre and indeed the various authors and texts we have been looking at these past few chapters.

Puig makes readers fellow queer movie fans by reproducing that very affect in his texts. In giving credence to that affective relationship he questions long-held beliefs of the vacuousness and triviality of movie fandom (that “excessive frivolity” that Pedro Almodóvar's Zahara so brazenly exulted). Puig, who signed his letters to friends as “Greta,” never hiding his fixation with those silver screen stars of his youth, doesn't relegate the movie fan figure to the realm of the banal. Instead, he forcefully connects him, whether in melodramatic epigraphs or effeminate protagonists, with larger literary, social and political issues. If he is the end-point of this project it is because his texts invite us to imagine a way to valorize that nostalgic childhood desire to make every day cinema and understand that as both an artistic imperative as well as an affective exhortation.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In a 1972 interview with Emir Rodríguez Monegal Puig confesses that he's afraid of reading Sontag's "Notes on Camp": "Sí, ves, acá me gustaría contarte una cosa. Nunca leí el ensayo de Susan Sontag; es como si le tuviera miedo, o miedo de concientizar ciertas cosas que intuyo nada más, o miedo de no estar de acuerdo y sentir que me manosea cosas que quiero. No sé, es una resistencia." ("Yes, here I'd like to tell you something. I've never read Susan Sontag's essay; it's as if I were afraid of it, or afraid it'd make concrete certain things I intuit, or afraid of not agreeing with it and feeling it'd manhandle things I love. I don't know, it's a resistance I feel.")

<sup>2</sup> There is a footnote in Pamela Bacarisse's "Chivalry and 'Camp' Sensibility in *Don Quijote*, with Some Thoughts on the Novels of Manuel Puig" that epitomizes the linkage between Puig and camp: "It would be tedious," she writes, "to list the countless examples of 'Camp' taste in Puig" (142) — which she nevertheless proceeds to do. To think of Puig and camp is to point out a self-evident (if crucially under-theorized) connection. In his book *Eminent Maricones: Arenas, Lorca, Puig and Me* Puig's friend Jaime Manrique notes that "Puig used camp as a tool to get at the truth of things" (40) while Daniel Balderston & José Mkistany include camp alongside melodrama in their description of Puig's work in their survey essay, "The Lesbian and Gay Novel in Latin America."

<sup>3</sup> In his article "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," John Fiske argues that there is a distinction to be made between the way textual knowledge is used in what he deems the "dominant habitus" and the "popular habitus:

it is used for discrimination in the former and for participation in the latter: But fan cultural knowledge differs from official cultural knowledge in that it is used to enhance the fan's power over, and participation in, the original, industrial text. The *Rocky Horror* fans who know every line of dialogue in the film use that knowledge to participate in and even rewrite the text in a way that is quite different from the way the Shakespeare buff, for instance, might use his or her intimate knowledge of the text. This dominant habitus would enable the buff not to participate in the performance, but to discriminate critically between it and other performances or between it and the 'ideal' performance in the buff's own mind. Textual knowledge is used for discrimination in the dominant habitus but for participation in the popular. (43)

This is precisely what sets film fans from film critics; not only their earnest engagement with the culture at work, but also the context within which that affective relationship is staged.

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably the most well-known of these three, the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy known for his novels dealing openly with homosexuality and transvestism (*De donde son los cantantes* [1967], *Cobra* [1972]), is usually associated with Cabrera Infante (the recipient of the chart) and Lezama Lima. He's here likened to British actress Vanessa Redgrave ("A divinity!") who would have been known to Puig and his friends for her work in *Blowup* and *A Man for All Seasons* (1966). Both Sánchez and Sainz are less widely known than Sarduy and in a bit of prescient wit, Puig's annotations for both speak to their relative youth and potential obscurity though contemporary promise. Francis: "Miss Christie's contract doesn't allow starlets under thirty to be signed by Metro Goldwyn Mayer." Prentiss: "No more stars under thirty!!!" Argentinian Néstor Sánchez was an experimental writer and close friend of Julio Cortázar to whom he's been likened. Fittingly, he is likened in the list to MGM recording artist Connie Francis with a string of Hot 100 hits but who is not remembered for her brief filmography in the 1960s. Another experimental writer, Gustavo Sainz is loosely connected to the Mexican "literatura de onda" movement and gained international exposure with his first novel *Gazapo* (1965). He's likened here to Paula Prentiss, an American actress known for her comedic roles in *Where the Boys Are* (1960) and the Woody Allen-penned *What's New Pussycat* (1965).

<sup>5</sup> As Richard Dyer notes in his seminal book on stardom, *Stars*, Hollywood stars were as much a phenomenon of production as they are one of consumption, pointing to the economics behind their creation, to "the enormous amount of money, time and energy spent by the industry building up star images through publicity promotion, fan clubs, etc." (13)

<sup>6</sup> Swason's line — "It seems that [*El beso de la mujer araña*] is a Post-Boom novel seeking to achieve a more direct engagement with sociopolitical reality, while problematizing the relationships between fiction and reality à la Boom. In this sense, the Post-Boom is as much the new face of the New Novel of the Boom as it is its replacement. ("The Post-Boom Novel" 87) — is a summation of the larger argument he makes in his earlier book *The New Novel in Latin America; Politics and Popular Culture after the Boom*.

<sup>7</sup> Recent scholarship on Puig has sought to explore alternative modes of understanding his work, from art history to comparative literature seeking to make connections with a wide array of artists, from Mark Tansey (See Marti-Peña's "El Verbo se hizo Signo y nos habitó: The Buenos Aires affair de Manuel Puig y los cuadros de Mark Tansey"), to Leslie Marmon Silko (Teorey's "Spinning a Bigendered Identity in Silko's Ceremony and Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*"), from Donald Barthelme (Herrer-Olaizola's "Revamping the Popular in Snow White and Pubis Angelical: The Residual Fictions of Donald Barthelme and Manuel Puig"), Camus and Calvino (Strebel's "Eco's Stopwatch and Narrative Time in Puig, Jean-Renaud Camus, and Calvino"), and Eugene Ionesco (Issacharoff's "Between Myth and Reference: Puig and Ionesco"), among others, leaving behind the seemingly exhausted terrain of discussing Puig alongside cinema.



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<sup>8</sup> Moon's *A Small Boy and Others, Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* has in many ways offered me a template through which to look back at the modern queer childhoods that led to the artistic careers this dissertation has been covering. The processes he isolates as being formative of modern queer childhood — “of uncanny perception and imitation, of initiation and self-initiation, of the gradual recognition of one’s desires and the production and transmission of images and narratives of these desires” (3) — get at the heart of how those proto-queer boys arm themselves with a decidedly visual arsenal through which to make sense of their own conflicting/ed desires, and use it to express themselves artistically.

<sup>9</sup> Speaking of *Dishonoured*, Puig stated that “Es una película que, cuando la veo, ¡ay, que cerca está de mis cosas!” (“It is a movie that when I watch it, oh how akin to my own stuff it is!”) (Corbatta 601, my translation), further stressing the affinity he feels toward it.

<sup>10</sup> The song “You Made Me Love You (I Didn’t Want To Do It)” is sung by a young Judy Garland in the 1938 musical comedy film *The Broadway Melody of 1938*. The scene, one of the earliest representations of film fandom, finds Garland’s Betty singing to a photograph of Clark Gable. With its invocation of irrepressible desire and the subsequent shaming it elicits from an authority figure (Betty’s mother) who considers such attachments problematic and out of the norm, this scene continues to feel emblematic for the way it portrays an enduring stereotype of movie fans. See Chapter One.

<sup>11</sup> This is precisely Lawrence Grossberg’s argument in “Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom” (*The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, Routledge 1992). Grossberg suggests that “the fan’s relation to cultural texts operates in the domain of affect or mood” (56). For Grossberg, fans “actively constitute places and forms of authority (both for themselves and for others) through the mobilization and organization of affective investments” (59), which are what distinguish fan relations from other more rigid structures. Framing the sensibility of fandom in terms of affect allows Grossberg to mine the very fluidity that fan relations depend on as well as the various ways they are deployed.

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<sup>12</sup> After seeing the film adaptation of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, John Kander, Fred Ebb and Harold Prince began working on a musical adaptation of Puig's novel, workshopping it as part of the New Musicals endeavor at the Performance Arts Center, State University of New York at Purchase where it premiered in May 1990. Panned by Frank Rich at the *New York Times* that "the show's potential virtues are being held hostage by a staging so overgrown that major esthetic reconsiderations, as opposed to cosmetic nips and tucks, are already foreclosed in this production" (C3). Two months later Puig died of a heart attack while at the local hospital in Las Palmas, Mexico where was being treated for peritonitis. It wouldn't be until Kander, Ebb, Prince and Terence McNally (who wrote the book for the musical) reworked the show for the West End in 1992 that it would become a success, later transferring to Broadway where it ran for 904 performances.

<sup>13</sup> This becomes all too clear during the latter part of the novel when Valentin, having gone from Molina's reluctant prison mate to his closest friend and confidant, decides to thank his cellmate for all he has done by having sex with him. Given the dialogue-based structure of the text, Puig offers nothing more than ellipses on the page to show nothing but suggest all:

— ...  
 — A little slower... please...  
 — ...  
 — That's better  
 — ... (218)

But the films in themselves (a Nazi propaganda film, a zombie flick, a Mexican melodrama among others), formally, depend on Molina's suggestive power as they depend on his language to recreate an audiovisual medium. The absence of descriptive language in the framing story of Valentin and Molina is contrasted with the overabundance of description when it comes to Molina's films. Thus, while the central plot presents Molina "stealing from mass culture," and offering up a "utopian alternative, a fantasy world where people can escape the degradation of their lives" (Llosa), it is Puig's attention to cinema's own grammar that is at the center of the films being retold.

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<sup>14</sup> The first one, for example, follows immediately after Valentin tells Molina that “If we’re going to be in this cell together like this, we ought to understand one another better, and I know very little about people with your type of inclination” (59). As if in response to this, the footnote that follows, in clinical and scholarly language, summarizes D.J. West’s arguments against the three most prominent theories on the physical origin of homosexuality from his book *Homosexuality: Its Nature and Causes* (1955). Beginning with West, the footnotes canvas the ways in which twentieth century theorists (from psychoanalysts to sociologists and anthropologists) have tried to account for homosexuality. Referencing a number of touchstone texts (Sigmund Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [1905], Otto Fenichel’s *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* [1945], Anna Freud’s *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* [1951], Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* [1955], Dennis Altman’s *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* [1971]), Puig’s footnote narrator manages to offer an encyclopedic take on the different discourses surrounding homosexuality.

<sup>15</sup> The reliance on similes is present throughout the novel whenever Molina is recounting a film: describing Irena’s dark tears in *Cat People*, he notes how they look “like filthy water from a puddle” (11); describing a fountain in *Her Real Glory*, he tells Valentin that it “seems...like meringue and the casement windows too, white palace all out of meringue” (56); while in describing the sweet sounds of a xylophone in the zombie flick, he tells Valentin that they are “like little soap bubbles that go popping one after another” (158).

<sup>16</sup> In her 1975 piece “Fascinating Fascism,” Sontag uses a review of Riefenstahl’s photography book on the Nuba clan to indict Riefenstahl’s career-long fascist aesthetic calling *The Triumph of the Will* “the most successful, most purely propagandistic film ever made, whose very conception negates the possibility of the film maker’s having an aesthetic or visual conception independent of propaganda.”

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